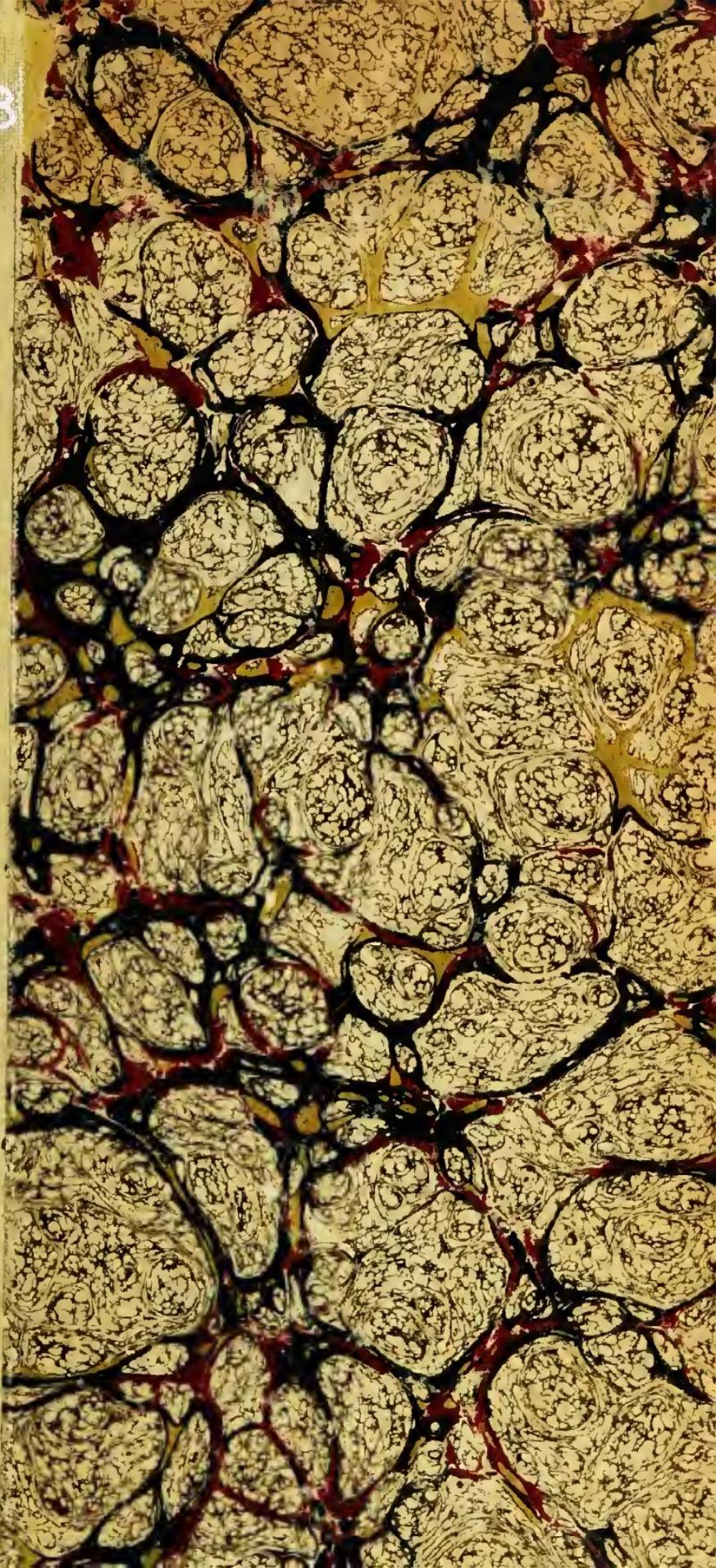


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# DRAMATIC UNITIES IN ENGLAND

*By*  
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## THE DRAMATIC UNITIES IN ENGLAND.

For the source of the dramatic unities, as for so many other things, we must go back to Aristotle. The passages that touch upon the unity of action are contained in the *Poetics*. As translated by Professor Butcher<sup>1</sup> these *loci* run as follows: "Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist in the unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life, which cannot be reduced to unity, and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action. Hence the error, as it appears, of all poets who have composed a Heracleid, a Theseid, or other poems of the kind. They imagine that as Heracles was one man, the story of Heracles must also be a unity." (P. VIII, 1 & 2.)<sup>2</sup> "A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end." (VII, 3.) "To define the matter roughly, we may say that the proper magnitude is comprised within such limits, that the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad." (VII, 7.) "As therefore in the other imitative arts, the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being the imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed or disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference is not an organic part of the whole." (VIII, 4.)

Of the unity of time Aristotle speaks but briefly: "Epic poetry and tragedy differ, again, in their length, for tragedy endeavors, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit, whereas the epic action has no limits of time." (V, 4.)

For the purposes of this study it is unnecessary to comment,

<sup>1</sup> Ed. of the *Poetics* (with trans. 1902).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. ch. XXIII, 1 & 4, where it is stated that unity of time, like unity of person, does not of itself bind events into a unity. (Professor Butcher.) Aristotle's views have added light thrown on them when studied in conjunction with the principles laid down by Plato in the *Phaedrus*.

at the present moment, on Aristotle's doctrine of the Major Unity, i. e., action.<sup>3</sup> One remark of Prof. Butcher's, however, it is desirable to bear in mind throughout our discussion: "Unity in Aristotle is the principle of limit, without which an object loses itself in the *ἀπειρον*, the region of the undefined, the indeterminate, the accidental. By means of unity the plot becomes individual and also intelligible."<sup>4</sup> Because of this service performed by the unity of plot or action, it has been admitted, with very generous latitude and with no common acceptance as to meaning, by many dramatists.<sup>5</sup> The Greek notion of the unity of time, however, and its companion, of place, require some explanation here.

To begin with, these two minor unities are not, strictly speaking, a doctrine with Aristotle; they are "a rough generalization as to the practice of the Greek stage."<sup>6</sup> They are the "scenic" unities, "continuities," as Prof. Moulton calls them, demanded by the exigencies of the Greek theatre. A Greek tragedy began where ours is ready to end,—that is, at the moment of suspense preceding the climax. From this point the catastrophe was rapidly sketched and the action concluded with a swift *dénouement*.<sup>7</sup> Thus there was little opportunity for elaboration, for counter-action, or for sub-plot, so that the unity of action was a tangible, distinctive feature of the drama, and not, as with our romantic playwrights, a vague, indeterminate generalization. The minor unities were conserved with equal decisiveness by the Chorus of the Greek tragedy. How the Chorus tended to have this effect requires no explanation.<sup>8</sup> It must not be forgotten,

<sup>3</sup> Full discussions on this point are found in Butcher's *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (3rd Ed. 1902, pp. 274 ff.); also in Moulton's *The Ancient Classical Drama* (1890, pp. 124 ff.).

<sup>4</sup> Butcher (op. cit., p. 275).

<sup>5</sup> Prof. Lounsbury (*Shakespearean Wars*, Vol. 1, Chap. I passim) seems to find for the doctrine a greater currency than it had. In its Aristotelian sense it is certainly far from universal in the practice of the English playwrights. Vd. *infra*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Butcher, as above, p. 277.

<sup>7</sup> Butcher (*idem*) calls this "The simple and highly concentrated movement of the Greek tragedy."

<sup>8</sup> It is to be noted that the stage was never empty. Cf. the French *liaison des scènes*, the irresistible result of strict adherence to time and place.

however, as many scholars have pointed out, that in the Greek drama "the time that elapses during the songs of the Chorus is entirely idealized"; and also that the unities of time and place (for the latter was equally a stage practice with the Greeks<sup>9</sup>) are by no means universally observed. It is necessary to remember, furthermore, that in the Greek observance of the unities there is little, if any, thought of "verisimilitude," of restricting the time and place for the purpose of producing the semblance of reality. Certainly the Greeks did not find these stage practices, as the Renaissance critics did, on any false and shackling notion of *vraisemblance*. We must look upon them as determined by the conditions of the Greek theatre;<sup>10</sup> yet, may we add that they are the concomitants of an inner, subtler necessity—of the law for unity of effect in all things, in a Gothic cathedral as well as in a Greek temple? Unity underlies all works of art and is an expression of an instinctive desire in man. If, then, the unities of time and place help, in a modest way, to fulfill this desire, may we not be justified in considering them with greater tolerance as, in a measure, connected with the basic principle of Unity? But more of this later.

Before coming to the Renaissance theory and practice it is necessary to bridge, in a few words, the gap between the Greeks and the Italians. That the Roman dramas are slavish imitations of the Greek is evident enough, but that they knew the *Poetics* may well be doubted.<sup>11</sup> Horace has an allusion to the unity of action :

<sup>9</sup> The reason for Aristotle's silence on the unity of place is thus commented upon by D'Aubignac (*Pratique* 1, 86): "J'estime qu'il l'a négligé (i. e., l'unité de lieu) a cause que cette unité étoit trop connue de son temps; et que les Choeurs qui demeuroient ordinairement sur le Théâtre durant tout le cours d'une Pièce, marquoient trop visiblement l'Unité de Lieu."

<sup>10</sup> Raumer (*Ueber die Poet. des Arist.*, 1828, p. 183) holds that the *place* of a Greek tragedy, as the *time*, was idealized. "Kann man aber von einer solchen Einheit sprechen wo der Ort so ganz bestimmungsglos, so negativ genommen wird, dass er eigentlich gar nicht mitspielt, sondern nur den Raum bezeichnet, hinreichend, dass Leute dasselbst gehn, stehn und reden können?"

<sup>11</sup> "Ob Seneca oder die Romer die Poetik des Aristotles gekannt haben, ist mehr als zweifelhaft." (Ebner, *Beitrag z. Gesch. der Einheiten in Italien*, p. 20.)

"Denique sit quidvis, simplex dumtaxat et unum." (v. 23.) Seneca adheres closely to the minor unities. On the other hand, the careful division of his dramas into acts made it possible for a new influence to come in later. In the Senecan plays the Chorus leaves the stage at the end of each act; thus a decided break in the *continuity* of the action is produced, and a change of scene is easily possible.<sup>12</sup>

The next mention of the *Poetics* is in Averroës' so-called translation.<sup>13</sup> This work, which is really a paraphrase<sup>14</sup> appearing first in 1481, drew attention to the original, and in 1498 came the earliest Latin translation, by Georgius Valla. Aristotle was now to take his place as a giver of dramatic laws, as he had already established his reputation as a scientist and a philosopher. Renaissance scholars eagerly turned to his work for the rules that were to determine the form of the dramatic output in Italy for a great number of years, and in France for many more. The Renaissance had its first home in Italy; hence the dramatic unities arose in this land. As Ebner expresses it, "Gerade dieses Land (Italian) also Ausgangspunkt diesen Regeln unsere besondere Aufmerksamkeit in Anspruch nehmen muss."<sup>15</sup>

The eager interest during the rebirth of learning in all documents of the past, the veneration for the name of Aristotle,

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Cunliffe (*The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy*) 1893, p. 37: "The absence of the Chorus during the progress of the action lessened Seneca's hold on the so-called unities of time and place."

<sup>13</sup> Averroës (Ibn-Roschd, 1126-1198). As Renan says (*Averroës et l'Averroïsme*) "Ibn-Roschd n'a lu Aristote que dans les anciennes versions faites du syriaque par Honein Ibn Ihak." Cited Ebner, o. c. p. 24. By this work in the *Münch. Beiträge*, I have benefited largely, in my summary of the unities in Greece and sixteenth-century Italy. Nor must I fail to acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor Spingarn's book and to his personal help, cheerfully given, in the matter of bibliography.

<sup>14</sup> Averroës did not expound his version as a code of laws for the writers of his land, but drew from it what they could appreciate. As Ebner puts it, "Wären die italienischen Übersetzer, Kommentatoren und Dichter eben so unbefangen der Poetik des Aristoteles gegenüber getreten, so würden die Regeln von der Einheiten nicht Jahrhunderte lang den freien Geistesschwung des Genies eingedämmt haben." Cf. with this, Saintsbury, *Hist. Criticism*, V. 2, p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> Ebner (o. c. p. 3) Cf. Morandi, *Voltaire contro Shakespeare*, etc., p. 169, ff.

accounts for the large number of Latin and Italian translations and adaptations of the *Poetics* that appeared in the 16th century in Italy. But the equally large number of commentaries on the text is accounted for by the very incompleteness of that text. Its *précis* form, its summary treatment, required expansion, elaboration, and was a veritable boon for gentlemen exegetically inclined. Gaspary expresses this well,—“Die vielfach dunklen und schwierigen Sätze der Poetik, boten immer die Möglichkeit, dass jeder darin fand was er brauchte, und um ihre Auslegung hat sich Jahrhunderte lang die literarische Kritik mehr gedreht, als um direkte Betrachtung der Kunst und des Kunstwerkes.”<sup>16</sup>

We shall briefly review the progress of Italian thought on the subject of the unities, with the ultimate aim of noting the trend of the criticism and its influence on English ideas. Ebner has found the earliest “modern” reference to dramatic laws in *Historia Betica*, a Latin play by Caroli Verardi of Cesena, acted in Rome in 1492. The author in his preface reveals a knowledge of rules for the theatre, but like his fellow-dramatist Ricci, and so many others, he does not choose to follow the laws.<sup>17</sup> The position of the first to refer at some length to the unity of time has been claimed for Giraldi Cintio;<sup>18</sup> yet if Trissino’s work, published posthumously, was written and known in 1529 (as there is good ground for believing), the credit must be given to the latter critic. In substance Trissino<sup>19</sup> repeats Aristotle,—the action is to be *una e compiuta e grande*; the time he limits “to one period of the sun or little more.” For the vague expres-

<sup>16</sup> Gaspary, *Gesch. der ital. Lit.*, V. 2, p. 562. Cited also by Ebner.

<sup>17</sup> Ebner (p. 162) gives the passage referred to in the text. It does not seem to have exercised any influence on later thought, its great interest lying in its early date, at the very threshold of the modern era. On Ricci Vd. *infra*.

<sup>18</sup> Spingarn (*Hist. Lit. Crit. in Ren.* 1908, p. 91) and others after him. Giraldi’s book dates 1554. The exact date of the completion of his work is April 20, 1543. Trissino (1478-1550) published the first four parts of his *Sei Divisione*, etc., in 1529. The two parts dealing with Tragedy and Comedy did not appear till 1563. Several circumstances (discussed by Ebner) make it likely that the later parts were ready simultaneously with the earlier.

<sup>19</sup> For work, etc., see Bibliography,—as for the other Italians cited.

sion—"one period of the sun"—this commentator offers no explanation, as he might have done if he had known the edition and commentaries of Robortelli (1548).<sup>20</sup>

Of greater importance is the fact that Trissino is perhaps the first to say specifically that the unity of time is a hard and fast rule of tragedy, and that "only ignorant poets" disregard it. This is a sweeping statement indeed, and by no means true. It marks, however, as Professor Spingarn points out, "the first distinction between the learned and ignorant poet, based on the test of the observance of the unity of time," which is "an artistic principle with Trissino that has helped to save dramatic poetry from the formlessness and chaotic condition of the Mediaeval drama."<sup>21</sup>

That Trissino's statement regarding "ignorant" poets is illiberal and untrue, is proved by the words of Ricci, a dramatist and contemporary of the critic. In the prologue to his *Tre Tiranni* (1553)<sup>22</sup> Ricci makes a surprisingly modern attack on the "theatric" laws. He sums up the case against the strict constructionists with spirit and intelligence, and from one point of view leaves little to be added. "It has pleased the author," he says, "to depart somewhat from the customs and rules of the ancients, who represent in their comedies but one action, accomplished in a brief time or in a single day. The author has wished that the present play should, according as the action demands, include many days and nights, even a whole year. And while he can frankly say that such was his pleasure, he has, none the less, several reasons to advance in support of his position: as we are now living in the present and not in times long past, and as the demands are different, it seems evident that with these changes should also be altered and renewed according to the time, poetry, and prose, and verse, and style, as well as the art of representation." Here is a sweeping rejection of the dramatic unities. And as Castelvetro first summed up

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Ebner, p. 59, who points this out.

<sup>21</sup> Spingarn (o. c. p. 93).

<sup>22</sup> Cited Ebner, p. 163. I have not read the work, which Ebner calls a comedy.

completely the case for the unities, so Ricci is the first, as far as is known, to deny them as completely.<sup>23</sup>

Giraldi Cintio was a dramatist as well as a critic and knew the difficulty of strict adherence to the unities. He at first defends his slight trespassing of the single day unity<sup>24</sup> and cites Greek and Latin precedent. Going back to the phrase of Aristotle, he declares himself willing to expand the words,—“a little more”—into two days.<sup>25</sup> Later Giraldi seems to have repented his latitude, and he becomes a conformist in practice as well as in theory. In the dramatist’s examination of his play *Heracleis*<sup>26</sup> occurs a statement that may be construed as the first mention of the unity of place. Giraldi shows that the time must be lengthened because of “la lontananza dei luoghi”—an argument we will meet again. Evidently he regards the unity of place not as a law, but as a mere help to the representation, not at all necessary for verisimilitude<sup>27</sup>—though the “distance between places” leads directly to the doctrine of the verisimilar.

To Robertelli belongs the doubtful honor of first giving to the drama an exact time limit, that of the artificial day of twelve hours. In favor of this view he makes the plea that “No work is done at night.”<sup>28</sup> His opinion is stoutly opposed by another critic, Bernardo Segni, who says that some deeds, such as plottings and murders, naturally belong to the night. The

<sup>23</sup> Of course it must be remembered that when Ricci wrote, the unities had not yet been made gospel by hundreds of critics and by the consenting bondage of as many dramatists. They were still being weighed in the balance, even in Italy. Cf. Ebner, p. 61.

<sup>24</sup> In his *Discorsi*, p. 250 ff., Cf. p. 213.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Spingarn (p. 91), who says, “One day or but little more.” Giraldi’s words are, “Le (dramatic poetry) diede piu spatio di uno giorno: & noi con la sua autorità componemneo l’Antile et la Didone di modo, che la lor attione tocco alquanto di due giorni.”

<sup>26</sup> See the passage in Ebner.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Giraldi’s discussion of “verisimilitude” in the “Epilogo” to his *Didone* (1543). He was incited to this by the criticism of Bartolomeo Cavalcanti on his play. His remarks (given by Ebner, p. 165) should be compared with those of Corneille in his *Discours*.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. D’Aubignac—*Pratique*, p. 109. Robortelli’s Latin edition and commentary is dated 1548. Segni’s is the first Italian translation.

unity of place is further commented upon by Maggi, who, by deriving the unities strictly from the necessity of preserving *verisimilitude*, gives the basis of future discussion.<sup>29</sup>

It is unprofitable for our purpose to examine into the theories of a number of other Italian commentators. There is no view worthy of attention until we come to Scaliger. This writer makes "no direct statement on the unity of time,—but his reference is unmistakable."<sup>30</sup> His indefinite limit is from six to eight hours. Nor does he allow anything on the stage that is not in strict accordance with *verisimile*. When dealing with the story of Ceyx, says this pedant, do not begin your play with the departure of the ship, as no storm of sufficient fury to sink the vessel can arise within the time allotted. Nor is it within reason to expect that a shipwreck can prove fatal when the vessel is hardly out of sight of land.<sup>31</sup> Such is the narrow, spiritless view of our dryasdust scholar. Let us have perfect adherence to truth, to actuality in all details, is the burden of his cry. No lies, no deceptions. The deadening effect of such criticism is evident enough. Unfortunately, the influence of Scaliger's ideas, shackling though they were, was widespread. As Ebner sums it up, "Die allgemeine Hochachtung, die ihm (Scaliger) also Gelehrten gezollt wurde, hat auch seiner Poetik zu dem Ansehen verholfen das sie nahezu zwei Jahrhunderte lang in Italien, Spanien, Frankreich und Deutschland genossen hat."

There remains for consideration the work of but one Italian critic, whose views, of prime importance in the formulation of the minor unities, exercised a vast influence on English thought.

<sup>29</sup> Maggi in his *Annotationes* (1550) is also the first to hint at a limitation of time for the epic. Minturno (1559 and 1563) narrows the time down to one year.

<sup>30</sup> Spingarn (op. cit. p. 94).

<sup>31</sup> Professor Spingarn in his citations (p. 96) from Scaliger is somewhat misleading. This is because of failure to mention that the Italian critic points to Ovid's story of Ceyx as his example. What Saintsbury (*Hist. Crit.*, V. 2, p. 76) says on Scaliger is well worth repeating: "Scaliger did not explicitly enjoin the Three Unities, but he did more than any other man has done to inculcate that unfortunate notion of 'verisimilitude' from which, much more than from Aristotle, they were derived."

This critic is Castelvetro.<sup>22</sup> His reasoning, as Professor Spingarn has pointed out, is based entirely on stage representation. It is the old notion of verisimilitude worked to such absurd extremes as to be fairly ludicrous. As bases for his deductions he propounds questions like the following: How long can the spectator sit out a performance without physical weariness? How many things can be presented him without making the mental strain too intense? Such views can but arouse wonder and despair. Foolish and illogical in the extreme, they barred the theatre to imagination and gave but grudging admittance to sympathy. It is to the perverted ideas of Castelvetro, as determined by his predecessors, that the unities of time and place owe the greatest share of their ill-repute.<sup>23</sup>

Having traced the course of Italian theory to the final formulation of the unities, we can now sum up the trend of the criticism. We shall thus be prepared to note the influence of this body of critical ideas upon English speculation on the subject.

It has been seen that the unities—all three—originated with the Greeks as stage practice, due to stage necessities. They were certainly not reasoned out by Aristotle on self-concocted premises. With the Italians the case is reversed. Ostensibly fathered on Aristotle,<sup>24</sup> they were really the result of *a priori*

<sup>22</sup> Spingarn (o. c. p. 97): “Castelvetro (1570) was the first theorist to formulate the unity of place, and thus to give the three unities their final form.” Ebner doubts (p. 41) whether Otto, in his Preface to *Saul*, was right in naming Castelvetro as “der Formulierer der Ortseinheit.” In fact, he names Jean de la Taille (1572) for this much-disputed position. The reasons he advances are by no means convincing or sufficient, and surely the amount of space given by the Italian critic to the discussion of the unities assures him undisputed possession of the honor. Ebner evidently has not noted the passage cited by Professor Spingarn (p. 99).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Professor Saintsbury (op. cit. p. 84): “And so the Three, the Weird Sisters of dramatic criticism, the vampires that sucked the blood out of nearly all European tragedy, save in England and Spain, for three centuries, make their appearance from the time of Castelvetro.”

<sup>24</sup> Manzoni (*Lettre à M. C. sur l'unité de temps, etc.*) well expresses the imagined embarrassment of the Philosopher at the honor thrust upon him: “Si ce philosophe revenait et qu'on lui présentât nos axiomes dramatiques comme issus de lui, ne leur ferait-il pas le même accueil que fait M. de Pourceaugnae à ces jeunes Languedociens . . . dont on veut à toute force qu'il se déclare le père?”

notions, taken from a hint of the ancients and defended and practiced with no consideration for the conditions of the contemporaneous stage. The Renaissance critic failed to give the same regard to the exigencies of the Italian stage that the Greek gave to his own, and thus the true lesson of Aristotle's example was lost upon them. What is more, the sixteenth century theorists, having established their preconceived ideas, turned round to censure the errors of the very ancients upon whom they professed to found these ideas. This is a method familiar to the neo-classic mind. The *a priori* notion which really gave rise to the Italian unities is that of "verisimilitude."<sup>35</sup> This idea of producing plays that must be faultless in their approximation to reality, of writing so that the result will be veridical to the uttermost, is present in all Italian speculation on the unities, from its earliest mention in this connection by Bartolomeo Cavalcanti (before 1543)<sup>36</sup> to the very end of the critical period. As a matter of dogma, "verisimilitude" seems to spring directly from the Renaissance perversion of the Aristotelian notion of "imitation." Misleading as much of Italian reasoning on the doctrine of "imitation" is, its application to the drama is beyond a doubt one of the saddest instances of neo-classic misjudgment. In its tendency the principle of verisimilitude is narrowing and shackling in the extreme. Its reaction upon the dramatist and the spectator is most disastrous. It permits the former no free swing of fancy; while it represses and atrophies the imagination of the latter. This is perhaps its most baneful influence upon Italian and French dramatic writings. Such is the tendency that struggled in vain for firm foothold upon English soil. Such is the theory that Corneille had to avow with half-hearted allegiance and to defend with quibble and sophistry. Unfortunately there arose no clear thinker to point out that it was not the basic idea of "unity"—whether of action, or of time, or of place,—that called for defense; that what the three really needed was liberal interpretation and plain understanding. And thus the much-maligned doctrine of unity—wrongly derived from an eminently false notion—was to suffer

<sup>35</sup> The points of contact of this idea with "imitation," and "decorum," and perhaps "realism," might well repay working out.

<sup>36</sup> I am not certain as to this claim of priority.

the brunt of the attack that should have been aimed at the underlying misconception. In other words, I do not think it too much to say that the minor unities as interpreted through the medium of the verisimilar, are really a perversion of the unities as understood by Aristotle and the Greek dramatists. That the Greeks regarded them with the latitude of some of our dyed-in-the-wool "romanticists," can admit, I think, of no doubt.

The unity of action, however, fared differently at the hands of the Italians. Whereas they succeeded in so distorting the minor unities as to render them beyond recognition, they treated the major unity with wholly disproportionate neglect. Castelvetro sums up this second tendency—no less baneful than the first—by distinctly subordinating the typical Greek unity. Thus the Italian neo-classicists, while making a pretense of reverence for the so-called rules of Aristotle, begin by diverting them from their true significance, and finish by reversing their true and natural order. Here, undoubtedly, the exegesis is at fault,—and not the fundamental idea which the three unities hold in common.

With this necessarily brief summary of the earlier evolution of the unities, we are ready to investigate their progress as a theory of dramatic art in England.<sup>37</sup> As has been already suggested, the discussion of the question by English dramatists and critics is taken up at the point where the Italians leave off,—so that the effect of the neo-classic tradition is evident. It will be necessary, therefore, to keep constantly in mind the viewpoint of Italian reasoning, and note the extent and the cause of English departure from it.

Our subject divides itself into two parts: the first from the beginnings to 1650 approximately; the second from 1650 to the end of the seventeenth century. The latter date, it must be said, is chosen mainly for convenience and limitation.

In the first period, English speculation on the unities is, with the exception of the work of Ben Jonson, merely tentative and largely casual. There is no considerable body of criticism

<sup>37</sup> The only survey of the dramatic unities in England is that contained in the first three chapters of Professor Lounsbury's *Shakespearean Wars*, Vol. I, already mentioned.

on the subject coming from this era of literary creation. One must make one's gleanings from a mass of uncorrelated material, finding an allusion here, a reference there,—and at the end the material is all too scanty. Yet the trends revealed by this small volume of criticism are unmistakable. On the one hand, there is a tendency, not too pronounced or dogmatic, toward rigid interpretation of the rules; on the other, a triumphant disregard of the principle of unity and a complete severing from it. The first is essentially neo-classic in spirit; the second is English,—an assertion of native independence.

In the sixteenth century the classic tradition in England was by no means dead or moribund.<sup>38</sup> An instance of this is the desire to preserve "decorum" expressed by various dramatists,—a desire that Jonson was to repeat with characteristic emphasis. An early example is the words of Richard Edwards in the Prologue to *Damon and Pythias* (1565):

"If this offend the lookers-on, let Horace then be blamed,  
Which hath our author taught at school, from whom he doth not swerve,  
In all such kind of exercise *decorum* to observe."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Professor Lounsbury (*op. cit.*) is inclined to underrate the strength of the classic influence at this period. He says, for instance, that Llyl was unacquainted with the doctrine of the unities. The studies of R. Warwick Bond have made it possible to deny this. (Vd. his Ed. of Llyl's plays, 1902, Vol. 2, p. 267, seq.) Mr. Bond says: "All of Llyl's plays require the lapse of a considerable time, with the exception of 'Mother Bombie' and 'The Woman.' . . . Of place he is much more careful. In no play are we transported far from the spot at which it opened, save in 'Midas' and in 'Endimion.' Furthermore, Llyl endeavors fitfully to observe that continuity of scenes which is a corollary from the strict observance of Time and Place." And again (p. 270), "To sum up, Llyl in the matter of Time and Place balances between classical precedent and romantic freedom, obviously aware of the rules and sometimes closely observing them, at others pretending to observe while he really violates, at others frankly disregarding them and claiming licenses which the later romantics abandoned." Surely these views of Llyl's are important when we consider his great influence upon Shakespeare's formative period.

<sup>39</sup> In Hazlitt's Dodsley (1874), Vol. 4. Similar references to "decorum" are found in Nathaniel Woodes' *The Conflict of Conscience* (1581) (Dodsley, Vol. 6, p. 34), in Robt. Wilmot's *Tancred and Gismonda*, prefatory Address, 1591, and in Florio's *Dialogues*. (Vd. below, p. 19.)

Another, and a more important passage, which is practically a plea for decorum rather than for the unities, is that contained in Whetstone's Dedication to *Promos and Cassandra* (1578) :

"The *Englishman* in this qualitie (i. e., truth to Nature) is most vaine, indiscreete and out of order: he fyrist groundes his worke on impossibilities; then in three howers ronnes he throwe the worlde, marryes, gets Children, makes Children men, men to conquer Kingdoms, murder Monsters, and bringeth Gods from Heauen, and fetcheth Dineles from Hel."<sup>40</sup>

These words merit some attention as the first English statement of an idea that enjoyed surprisingly widespread currency,<sup>41</sup> and which Sidney thought fit to make the central point of his attack on the romantic playwrights. There is no play extant, as several scholars have pointed out, from which Whetstone could have drawn the ground for his charge. Professor Lounsbury describes it well as "a piece of rhetorical exaggeration to emphasize an opinion rather than a calm statement of fact."<sup>42</sup> It might with equal truth be urged that because of the wild extravagance of melodrama, all physical action on the legitimate boards should be unduly restricted. In pointing out the extreme of disregard of the rules, Whetstone must not be assumed as pleading for a conformity equally extreme. Moreover, this view gathers weight when it is remembered that the critic is no stickler, in his own practice, for adherence to the rules. As a matter of fact, he fails to observe them in any rigid acceptance in his *Promos and Cassandra*. We can hardly look upon him, then, as influenced to any appreciable extent by the Italian tradition.

The doctrine of the three unities enters English criticism with Sidney.<sup>43</sup> His contribution to the discussion is far and

<sup>40</sup> Given by Gregory G. Smith, *Eliza. Critical Essays*, Vol. 1.

<sup>41</sup> It is frequently reiterated in England, among others, by Sidney, Jonson, Fielding (*Tom Jones*, Ch. V) and by Gildon (see below, note, page 18); in Spain by Cervantes and Lope de Vega; in France by D'Aubignac, Boileau and Voltaire; and in Italy by Ingegneri (1598).

<sup>42</sup> *Idem*, p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> Spingarn, and others. Sidney's work was published 1595 and written c. 1583.

away the most important that antedates Jonson's, and comes, of course, in his *Apologie for Poetry*:

"Our Tragedies and Comedies (not without cause cried out against) observing rules neyther of honest ciuitie nor of skilfull Poetrie, excepting *Gorboduck* . . . (yet) it is faulty both in place and time; the necessary companions of all corporall actions. For where the stage should alwaies represent but one place, and the uttermost time presupposed in it should be, both by *Aristoteles* precept and common reason, but one day, there is both many dayes and many places, inartificially imagined. But if it be so in *Gorboduck*, how much more in all the rest? where you shall haue *Asia* of the one side, and *Affrick* of the other, and so many other under-kingdoms, that the Player, when he commeth in, must ever begin with telling where he is, or els the tale wil not be conceiued. Now ye shal haue three Ladies walke to gather flowers, and then we must belieue the stage to be a Garden. By and by we heare newes of shipwracke in the same place, and then wee are to blame if we accept it not for a Rock. Vpon the back of that, comes out a hidious Monster, with fire and smoke, and then the miserable beholders are bounde to take it for a Cau. While in the meantime two Armies flye in, represented with foure swords and bucklers, and then what harde heart will not receiue it for a pitched field? Now, of time they are much more liberall, for ordinary it is that two young Princes fall in loue. After many trauerces, she is got with childe, deliuered of a faire boy; he is lost, groweth a man, falls in loue, and is ready to get another childe; and all this in two hours' space: which how absurd it is in sence euen sence may imagine, and Arte hath taught, and all ancient examples iustified, and, at this day, the ordinary Players in Italie wil not erre in." <sup>44</sup>

Sidney is evidently making a plea for greater polish in English dramatic performances. As a man of education and refinement his taste was displeased by the rudeness of the Elizabethan stage. Here we have a further indication of the fact that in

<sup>44</sup> Quoted from Smith's ed. (as above), v. 1, p. 196 ff. The critic enforces his plea for the unity of one day by instancing the practice of Plautus and Terence. "Let us hit with him [Plautus] and not miss with him," says Sidney.

England the "theatre" was for the populace and not for the privileged and cultured few.

It is well to note that the critic looks upon the minor unities as derived from "Aristoteles, and common reason," backed by the practice of the ancients and contemporary Italian "Players." It has been pointed out by several writers<sup>45</sup> that Sidney owes much in the general tone of his criticism and in his conclusions to Castelvetro, so that in respect to the unities he accepts the neo-classic view.<sup>46</sup> His is the first English statement of the doctrine—"one place and one day"; yet it is hard to imagine that Sidney was in sympathy with the Italian hair-splitting on the subject; his mind was certainly not of that construction. He is, however, undeniably in accord with the minor unities as a principle.

In at least one other respect is Sidney's statement of importance. His exposition of the scenic bareness of the English stage touches upon a vital point in the discussion. I refer to the question of "imagination." Our critic is unintentionally amusing in his use of the expression "many places *inartificially imagined*";—the fact is that the Elizabethan dramatist and the Elizabethan play-goer did imagine "*inartificially*," and I have already suggested that the Italian critics refused to permit "*inartificial*" imagination, or any sort of imagination. This, as I shall attempt to show, is the crux of the question, as regards the Elizabethan dramatist. The latter's appeal is everlasting to the imagination. He invokes it for his wonder-working; it is for him the staff of Prospero, and the listeners must be Ariels, obedient to his wizardry and themselves dowered with the gracious gift of fancy. On it rests his unity and his effect.—It is this influence that Sidney was unwittingly decrying.

We have already noted the similarity of the strictures that both Sidney and Whetstone lay on the dramatist who trans-

<sup>45</sup> E. g., Spingarn, and Breitinger, *Rev. Critique*, v. 13, n. s. Vols. 7 & 8.

<sup>46</sup> Sidney's indebtedness to neo-classicism is summed up in his advocacy of the three rules. Cf. Hamelius (*Die Kritik*, etc., p. 14), "Nur eine einzige Regel der Neoklassiker nahm Sir Ph. Sidney an: er empfahl für das Drama die drei Einheiten des Ortes, der Zeit, und der Handlung."

gresses the unity of time.<sup>47</sup> The character of the passage must not be taken as a warranty, as in the case of Whetstone, that the later critic is not a thorough-going classicist in this matter. It must be remembered that Sidney began the latter part of his critique with a thesis in mind,—“that poetry is now despised in England,” and that the practice of the ancients must be revived. This fact is evident in his reference to the unity of action. True to his thesis he points out that Euripides does not begin his play “ab ovo,” hence English dramatists should likewise refrain from beginning too far back in their story. Sidney’s statement, it is well worth noting, is limited in application to the writers who “will represent history.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, he takes up the point at the tail-end of his discussion, and in the briefest possible manner. We see in this a subordination of the unity of action—certainly the result of Italian influence.

The next mention of the unities is but an indirect reference. It occurs in Florio’s *Dialogue in Italian and English*,<sup>49</sup> and is, in effect, a plea for decorum:

- G. After dinner we will go see a play.
- H. The plaies that they play in England are not right comedies.
- T. Yet they do nothing else but plaire every daye.
- H. Yea, but they are neither right comedies, nor right tragedies.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Chas. Gildon (*Laws of Poetry*, etc., 1721, p. 174): “Like Webster in his *Duchess of Malfi*, bring in a child just born in the beginning of the play, and before the end of it show him a man not only full grown, but also in years, than which I think there can be nothing more absurd.” The similar absurdity of complete disregard of the unity of place is shown in a like strain by Angelo Ingegneri (*Discorso della Poesia Rappresentativa*, 1598). He takes a play having for its scenes some five or six places in different parts of the world. As the act ends every time there is a change of scene, says our critic, the play therefore has fifteen or twenty acts!

<sup>48</sup> Thns Sidney thinks that “histories” were most subiect to the neglect of the unity of action, as he understood that unity. The critic links it certainly with Greek stage practice. Cf. the passage, “Lastly if they will represent a history, they must not, as Horace saith, begin ‘ab ovo,’ but they must come to the principal point of that one action which they will represent” (p. 49 Cook’s ed.). This connects with Professor Schelling’s “epic-unity” of the chronicle-play. See his *The English Chronicle Play*, 1902.

<sup>49</sup> Cited Malone: *Variorum Ed. of Sh.’s Plays*, 1821, Vol. 3, p. 41, note. The date of the dialogue is 1591.

G. How would you name them, then?

H. Representations of *histories*, without any decorum.

A far richer passage, though not a direct discussion of the subject, is found in Dekker's *Old Fortunatus* (pr. 1600). Its importance lies in the stress it places on the imaginative powers demanded of the spectators. In spirit, the lines cited below are singularly like those in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Both dramatists express the same reliance on the "winged thought" of the spectator, and both evince a tacit but deep-seated antagonism to the rules as commonly accepted. This is truly Elizabethan and native,—its spirit is legitimately descended from the mysteries and miracle plays of the Middle Ages. The first *locus* is in the Prologue to Dekker's play:

"And for this small Circumference must stand  
 For the imagind Sur-face of much land  
 Of many Kingdomes, and since many a mile  
 Should here be measured out: our muse intreats  
 Your thoughts to help poore Art, and to allow  
 That I may serue as Chorus to her scenes;  
 She begs your pardon, for sheele send me foorth,  
 Not where the lawes of Poetry doe call  
 But as the storie needes; your gracious eye  
 Gines life to Fortunatus historie."<sup>50</sup>

Again, before the second "scene," the Chorus says:

"The world to the circumference of heauen,  
 Is as a small point in Geometrie,  
 Whose greatness is so little, that a lesse  
 Canot be made: into that narrow roome,  
 Your quicke imaginations we must charme,  
 To turn that world: and (turn'd) again to part it  
 Into large kingdomes, and within one moment  
 To carry Fortunatus on the wings  
 Of actiue thought, many a thousand miles."<sup>51</sup>

In a similar strain the Chorus speaks at his next appearance:

"If your swift thoughts clap on their wonted wings,  
 In Genoway may you take this fugitive,  
 Where hauing cozened many Jewellers,

<sup>50</sup>Thos. Dekker, *The Comedy of Old Fortunatus*, p. 54 (in *Münch. Beiträge*, etc., 1901, No. 21).

<sup>51</sup> Idem, p. 76.

To England backe he comes;  
 He clasps her [Agripyne] in his armes, and as a Rauen,  
 Griping the tender-hearted Nightingale,  
 So flies he with her, wishing in the ayre  
 To be transported to some wildernesse.  
 Imagine this the place: see, here they come.'' <sup>52</sup>

We are now ready to examine the views of Shakespeare, whose attitude, as already hinted, is distinctly English and Elizabethan. He nowhere expresses in so many words an acquaintance with the unities. Professor Lounsbury has argued at some length to prove that the poet was not in ignorance of the doctrine,—certainly, it would appear, a view that can admit of little doubt.

The passage of special interest for our purpose is the lines already referred to, in *Henry V*:

"But pardon, gentles all,  
 The flat, unraised spirits that have dared  
 On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth  
 So great an object: can this cockpit hold  
 The vasty fields of France? or may we cram  
 Within this wooden O the very casques  
 That did affright the air at Agincourt?  
 O, pardon! since a crooked figure may  
 Attest in little place a million;  
 And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,  
 On your imaginary forces work.  
 Suppose within the girdle of these walls  
 Are now confined two mighty monarchies,  
 Whose high upreared and abutting fronts  
 The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:  
 Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;  
 Into a thousand parts divide one man,  
 And make imaginary puissance;  
 Think, when we talk of horses that you see them  
 Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth,  
 For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,  
 Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times,  
 Turning the accomplishment of many years  
 Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,  
 Admit me Chorus to this history.'' <sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Idem, p. 112.

<sup>53</sup> Prologue, ll. 8 ff.

And again, the Prologue to Act II:

"Linger your patience on, and we'll digest  
 The abuse of distance, . . .  
 The King is set from London; and the scene  
 Is now transported, gentles, to Southampton;  
 There is the playhouse now, there must you sit:  
 And thence to France shall we convey you safe,  
 And bring you back, charming the narrow seas  
 To give you gentle pass."<sup>54</sup>

The essential inadequacy of his stage for the representation of the "hugeness" of things is thus expressed by the dramatist:

"Of such as have [read the story]  
 I humbly pray them to admit the excuse  
 Of time, of numbers, and due course of things,  
 Which cannot in their huge and proper life  
 Be here presented."<sup>55</sup>

It is in a precious passage such as this that the great dramatist, in a momentary indulgence of self-revelation, opens for us the guarded portals of his artistic consciousness. While, indeed, one gets no direct expression of Shakespeare's knowledge of the unities, the implication is thoroughly convincing. Nor need we harbor doubts as to the master's attitude. Addressing himself to the sophisticated and critical part of his audience, he begins with what is surely an interrogation of verisimilitude; and he goes on to reiterate, with insistence, Dekker's abiding faith in the quickening imaginations of his spectators. One may find here, too, Shakespeare's pronouncement on the essential irreconcilability between the vaguer unity of the historical or chronicle play, and the definite, classic unity that he must have known.

In addition to the passages already given, one or two others may be quoted from Shakespeare in connection with the dramatic unities.<sup>56</sup> In the *Winter's Tale* the playwright expresses his

<sup>54</sup> Prologue, Act II, ll. 31 ff.

<sup>55</sup> Prol., Act V; ll. 2 ff.

<sup>56</sup> Professor Lounsbury (o. c.) believes that "scene indivisible, or poem unlimited," refers to the unities. Vd. Hamlet, II, 2, 418. With this should perhaps be connected the lines in the *Spanish Tragedy* (IV, 1, 158):

consciousness of the fact that the story must jump an interval of sixteen years:

“Impute it not a crime  
To me or my swift passage, that I slide  
O'er sixteen years and leave the growth untried  
Of that wide gap.”<sup>57</sup>

And again, in *Cymbeline*:

“The swiftest harts have posted you by land;  
The winds of all the corners kiss'd your sails,  
To make your vessel nimble.”<sup>58</sup>

It may be added that allusions, similar to the last, to the quick flight of time are of frequent occurrence in the plays. This leads one to the conclusion that Shakespeare was at least conscious of the necessity to preserve a certain propriety, though not a verisimilitude of time. A play like *The Tempest* places this beyond peradventure.

Another independent is Marston. In the *Argumentum* to his *Dutch Courtezan*<sup>59</sup> he frankly confesses to having included a sub-plot. He further identifies himself with the romanticists by his statement in *What You Will* (1607):<sup>60</sup>

“Know rules of art  
Were shaped to pleasure, not pleasure to your rules.”

Marston implies here, it seems, that “rules of art” were being urged,—and indeed they were, forcibly and vociferously, for the urging was done by no other than “rare Ben Jonson”—“Master Ben.” Jonson argued for the rules so often and at such

HIERONIMO: The Italian tragedians were so sharpe  
Of wit that in one houres meditation  
They would performe any-thing in action.  
LORENZO: And well it may, for I haue seene the like  
In Paris, mongst the French tragedians.

On the relations between *Hamlet* and the *Spanish Tragedy*, consult the article by Professor A. H. Thorndike in *Pub. Mod. Lang. Ass'n*, Vol. 17.

<sup>57</sup> Chorus to Act IV; ll. 4 ff.

<sup>58</sup> II, 4, 27.

<sup>59</sup> Printed 1605. Vd. Works of John Marston (Ed. Bullen, 1887).

<sup>60</sup> Induction to the play. Idem, v. 2, p. 323.

length, that the sum of his criticism on the question is the most considerable prior to Dryden. He discussed the issues within plays, and before and after plays, and in miscellaneous notes or *Timber*, and in conversation, we may believe, with Drummond, as well as, probably, with many another good listener. It was natural for such diligence to be rewarded and Jonson became the recognized champion of the "rules." The dramatist was not backward in asserting his position. In the preface prefixed to Brome's *Northern Lass* (1632), Jonson, addressing the younger playwright, says:

"the good applause,  
Which you have justly gained from the Stage,  
By observation of those Comick Laws  
Which I, your Master, first did teach this age."<sup>61</sup>

The authority of Jonson was acknowledged by a large number of his contemporaries in a volume of praise, *Jonsonus Virbius*, issued in 1638. In this work the Master is described by John Cleveland as

"The voice most echo'd by consenting men."<sup>62</sup>

And again, by Schackerley Marmion, as

"Knowing to move, to slack, or to make haste,  
Binding the middle with the first and last:  
He framed all minds, and did all passions stir,  
And with a bridle guide the theatre."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Brome (Richard) *Dramatic Works*, London 1873, Vol. 3. A reminder of "The War of the Theatres" (Vd. Penniman, *Penn. Studies in Phil.*, etc., v. 4, No. 3, 1897) comes in the lines that Richard West contributed to *Jonsonus Virbius*:

"Histro-Mastix (lightning-like) doth wound  
Those things alone that solid are and sound."

(Jonson's Wks., ed. Cunningham, IX, 472.)

Another contributor, R. Brideoake, is moved in his enthusiasm for Jonson, to heap violent epithets upon the devoted head of Brome:

"Though the fine plush and velvets of the age  
Did oft for sixpence damn thee from the stage,  
And with their mast and acorn stomachs ran  
To the nasty sweepings of thy serving man."

(idem, p. 470.)

<sup>62</sup> idem, p. 449.

<sup>63</sup> idem, p. 466.

Jonson's authority in exploiting the dramatic unities is conceded by Beaumont, who was, it should be noted, but little influenced by his fellow-poet in this matter:

“I would have shown  
To all the world the art which thou alone  
Hast taught our tongue, the rules of time, of place,  
And other rites.” . . .<sup>64</sup>

Jonson first enunciates his views in his third comedy, *Every Man Out of His Humor* (1599). His earliest period, as has been pointed out by several critics,<sup>65</sup> is romantic. But in the play mentioned, the dramatist turns his attention, in a sort of running commentary on the work, to the problem of dramatic laws. Through his mouthpiece, Cordatus, he expresses repugnance for those “who are nothing but forme”—those who would wish in all things to follow unbendingly the “Terentian manner” of comedy. He is manifestly out of sympathy with devotees of “nice observation.”<sup>66</sup> But on the question of the unity of

<sup>64</sup> Cunningham, Vol. I, p. cclxv. Beaumont, *To My Dear Friend, Master Ben Jonson, upon his Fox*. Perhaps the completest avowal of Jonson's authority is that of Jasper Mayne:

“The stage was still the same, two entrances  
Were not two parts of the world disjoined by seas.  
There were land tragedies; no prince was found  
To swim a whole scene out, then o' the stage drowned;  
Pitched fields, as Red Bull wars, still felt thy doom;  
Thou laidst no sieges to the music room.  
Thy scene was free from monsters; no hard plot  
Call'd down a God t' untie th' unlikely knot.”

*(Jonsonus Virbius, idem, p. 451.)*

This passage should be compared with Sidney's. It is, of course, Horatian in tone. Collate also the strikingly similar lines of Jonson's in *The Magnetic Lady*, end of Act I (Vd. below).

<sup>65</sup> By Lounsbury (op. cit.). Vd. also, Woodbridge, *Studies in Jonson's Comedy*.

<sup>66</sup>I append the passage under discussion:

M. Does he observe all the lawes of Comedie in it?

C. What lawes meane you?

M. Why the equall division of it into Acts and Scenes, according to the Terentian manner; his true number of Actors; the furnishing of the Scene with *Grex* or *Chorus*, and that the whole Argument fall within the compasse of a daies efficencie.

C. O, no; these are too nice observations. . . . If those lawes

place his attitude is unmistakably classical, as an examination of the lines will show. The dialogue is between Mitis and Cor-datus, who are discussing the drama in an *Inductio*:

M. O, the fortunate Iland<sup>67</sup> masse, he has bound himself to a strict law there.

C. Why so?

M. Well, we will not dispute of this nowe; but what's his Scene?

C. Mary, *Insula fortunata, Sir.*

M. He cannot lightly alter the Scene, without crossing the seas.

C. He needes not, having a whole Ilande to runne through, I thinke.

M. No! howe comes it, then, that in some one play we see so manye Seas, Countries, and Kingdomes past over with such admirable dexteritie?

C. O, that but shewes how wel the Authors can trauaile in their vocation, and out-run the apprehension of their Auditory.<sup>67</sup>

Here Jonson undeniably commits himself to the doctrine of place; and from the time of this declaration dates his advocacy of the rules. He is willing, it is true, to permit the whole island to be the "place," but this allows the theory but little extension and is in keeping with classical tradition. Professor Lounsbury, in commenting on the passage, points out that it ends up "with the first statement in our tongue of the assumed incapacity of the auditor to comprehend change of scene,"<sup>68</sup> an idea that furnished a ready entrance to the doctrine of verisimilitude. The tendency here expressed grew with Jonson into rigor.

From this standpoint Jonson never departed. It is true he was compelled in *Sejanus* to deviate from "the strict laws of you speake of had been delivered to us *ab Initio*, and in their present vertue and perfection, there had been some reason of obeying their powers; but 'tis extant, that that which we call *Comoedia* was at first nothing but a single and continued Satyre. . . . I see not then but we should enjoy the same *Licentia*, or free power to illustrate and heighten our invention, as they did; and not bee tied to those strict and regular formes, which the nice ness of a fewe (who are nothing but *Forme*) would thrust upon us." (Quoted from G. G. Smith op. cit.)

Here we have Jonson in a completely liberal attitude,—even to the denying of the unity of time. He does not think it needful that the whole Argument fall within a "daies efficiencie."

<sup>67</sup> Vd. G. G. Smith, *Eliz. Crit. Essays*, where the entire passage is given.

<sup>68</sup> op. cit. p. 30.

time," but for this lapse he amply apologizes in the Preface to the play:<sup>69</sup>

"If it be objected that what I publish is no true poem in the strict laws of time, I confess it: as also in the want of a proper chorus; whose habits and moods are such and so difficult as not any whom I have seen since the ancients; no, not they who most presently affected laws, have yet come in the way of. Nor is it needful, or almost possible in these our times and to such auditors as commonly things are presented, to preserve the old state and splendor of dramatic poems, with preservation of popular delight."

In speaking of the "popular delight," Jonson unconsciously hit upon a vital point in the attitude of the Elizabethan audience toward the dramatic unities. It was a "popular" audience, of decidedly old-fashioned and conservative desires with regard to the theatre. But, though Jonson repeated the thought in *The Magnetic Lady*, he refused to be swayed by the demands of the "general." His habit of conformity grew upon him, until, in *The Alchemist*, he produced his ideal of regularity.

The Prologue to *Volpone* (c. 1605) expresses Jonson's determination to adhere unbendingly to the rules:

"The laws of time, place, person he observeth  
From no needful rule he swerveth."<sup>70</sup>

Repenting of early sins, Jonson, in the later version of his *Every Man in His Humor*,<sup>71</sup> is careful to call attention in the Prologue, to his change of heart, and casts ridicule, in the manner of Sidney, on the rudeness of the English stage and its failure to preserve decorum. The dramatist sees, he says, that you are inclined

<sup>69</sup> Acted 1603, pub. 1605.

<sup>70</sup> Note, *persons*, not *action*. This is, it would seem, another form of the "decorum" idea with relation to types. The poet says, in the words of Corneille, "Qu'il a suivi surtout une unité de personnages." Cf. with the excerpt in the text, the words of Lodowick Barry (Vd. *infra*), "Observing all those ancient streams . . . as *time, place, person.*"

<sup>71</sup> Original (c. 1597) printed 1601 in quarto. The Prologue is added to the folio of 1616.

“To make a child now swaddled, to proceed  
 Man, and then shoot up in one beard and weed  
 Past threescore years; or with three rusty swords,  
 And help of some few foot and half-foot words,  
 Fight over York and Lancaster’s long jars,  
 And in the tyring-houſe bring wounds to scars.  
 He rather prays you would be pleased to see  
 One ſuch today, as other plays ſhou’d be;  
 Where neither Chorus wafts you o’er the ſeas,  
 Nor creaking throne comes down the boys to please.”

The reiterated censure of the defiance of the unities of time and place reaches the extreme of exaggeration in the lines appended to Act I of *The Magnetic Lady* (c. 1632) :

Boy: . . . So, if a child could be born in a play and grow up to a man, in the first scene, before he went off the stage: and then after to come forth a squire, and be made a Knight: and that Knight to travel between the acts, and do wonders in the Holy Land or elsewhere: kill Paynims, wild boars, dun cows, and other monsters; beget him a reputation, and marry an emperor’s daughter for his mistress: convert her father’s country; and at last come home lame, and all-to-be-laden with miracles.

Dampley: These miracles would please, I assure you, and take the people: for there be of the people, that will expect miracles, and more than miracles from this pen.

Boy: Do you think this pen can juggle? <sup>72</sup>

The only other expression of Jonson’s that we need consider

<sup>72</sup> Again, at the end of Act III, the Boy refers to the time limit,—“made her fall into her throes presently, and within that compass of time allowed to the comedy.” The English audience continued their desire for change over a long period. Professor Lounsbury (op. cit. p. 48), speaking of a later time, says: “It (the party against the unities) may be said to have had the secret sympathy of most of the spectators; at least it never incurred their hostility. It was not, indeed, dread of the hearers that made the English playwright observe the unities; it was dread of the critics.” That the sympathy of the audience was not always a “secret” is demonstrated by the change of scene that Garrick introduced into the representation of Whitehead’s *School for Lovers*. In the Prologue to the play, Garrick says to the audience:

“Still he persists—and let him—*entre nous*  
 I know your tastes and will indulge them too.  
 Change you shall have; so set your hearts at ease;  
 Write as *he* will, we’ll act it as *you* please.”

(Cited by Pye, *A Commentary Illustrating the Poetics of Aristotle*, 1792, p. 135.)

here, comes in his collection of miscellaneous notes and thoughts on criticism, called *Timber* or *Discoveries*.<sup>73</sup> Its importance rests in the fact that it takes up the unity of action, which the dramatist treats here for the first time. He asks, "What is the utmost bound of a fable?" and answers the query in terms entirely Aristotelian:

"It behooves the action in tragedy or comedy to be let grow till the necessity ask a conclusion; wherein two things are to be considered: first, that it exceed not the compass of one day; next, that there be place left for digression and art." And again, "The fable is called the imitation of one entire and perfect action, whose parts are so joined and knit together, as nothing in the structure can be changed or taken away, without impairing or troubling the whole, of which there is a proportionable magnitude in the members."

This reads very much like a free rendering of the original which the author intended to keep in mind, though he did not think it necessary to follow it, with any amount of rigor, in practice.<sup>74</sup> Having examined Jonson's pronouncements on the dramatic unities, we may now with advantage deduce his position in the controversy, and in addition, consider first, his indebtedness to foreign sources, and then his influence upon the opinion and practice of his contemporaries.

I believe there need be no hesitancy in deciding that Jonson is a classicist in so far as the minor unities are concerned.<sup>75</sup> His practice tends to support this opinion. "Jonson's treatment of the unities is consistent with his theories as far as the circumstances of his age would permit,"<sup>76</sup> and this reservation was reluctantly admitted, as we have seen, by Jonson himself. In the main he is scrupulous in his observation of the unities of time and place, though in his tragedies,—all of them historical,

<sup>73</sup> Pub. 1640, written c. 1630. Ed. by F. E. Schelling, 1892. Vd. p. 85.

"On the construction of *Timber*, see the Preface to Schelling's edition; also Professor Spingarn's article, *Mod. Phil.*, Vol. 2, 1905.

<sup>75</sup> Professor Lounsbury says: "It is difficult to determine Jonson's precise attitude." Cf. Woodbridge (op. cit. p. 6), e. g., "His theories are . . . more satisfying though narrower than Dryden's."

<sup>76</sup> Schelling (o. c., note to p. 85).

it should be noted,—the impossibility of adherence to his principles was apparent even to him.<sup>77</sup> In one other respect can Jonson be identified with the neo-classic tradition,—in his disregard for the unity of action. Its place seems to have been usurped for him by the “unity of persons” to which I have already referred. In his subversion of the major unity Jonson falls in with the attitude of his contemporaries. Several of the greater plays of Shakespeare, and some of the lesser, are marred by a too general neglect of this unity. The causes for this disregard, common to the majority of the Elizabethan playwrights, will be suggested below.

A few words will suffice to sum up Jonson's indebtedness to earlier critical thought. The only other Englishman with whom we can institute comparisons is Sidney. That Jonson knew *The Apology* appears likely enough, and we have already called attention to the reiteration by the dramatist of Sidney's fault-finding with the rudeness of the stage.<sup>78</sup> Jonson's foreign rela-

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Woodbridge (p. 17): “The noteworthy thing is that in thus setting at naught a rule he had himself enunciated, Jonson was conforming to a higher law, founded on a fundamental distinction between tragedy and comedy.” Miss Woodbridge goes on to develop this fundamental distinction. Tragedy is a clash between will and law, “essentially grounded on time.” It demands movement, struggle, development. Comedy, on the other side, deals with “the fleeting aspect of things.” While this distinction appears warranted in a way, there is danger of over-emphasizing it. Our notion of “tragedy” is no longer Elizabethan; to the modern mind the tragic in *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, is so accentuated as virtually to demand the fifth act for recovery from painful sensations. Then, too, the Elizabethan tragedies are, in a broad sense, historical, and, as a Restoration dramatist asked, “Where can Brutus die but in Philippi field?” The chronicle play, the historical tragedy, can not be brought within the rules, whereas our tragedies of to-day, though the theme be Elizabethan and universal, present no difficulty to classical adherence. We are not plot-ridden to the extent that Shakespeare and Jonson were, and the modern dramatist who chooses to borrow an historical or literary tale, is enabled to depart from his source to a degree as far beyond the Elizabethan as the latter went beyond the Greek. The Greek audience knew the story, the Elizabethan demanded little but the story, and the modern theatre-goer is content to let the story take second place, in the interest of watching the revealing of character and “the clash of wills.”

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Spingarn: *Seventeenth Century Critical Essays*, Vol. 1, Intro. p. XIV.

tions are not so evident. What Professor Spingarn says in this connection seems probable,—“His (Jonson’s) knowledge of critical development on the continent was limited by his small French and less Italian,” and perhaps this fact would account for the wide disagreement in the reasoning on the unities, between the dramatist and the Italian neo-classicists. We hear nothing in our poet of the Italian “*verisimilitude*,” <sup>79</sup> or the wire-drawn arguments on the length of the theoretic day,—and we may speculate on the proneness of our critic to such thinking, even had it been familiar to him. How far Jonson is indebted to Dutch scholars, the present writer is unable to judge.<sup>80</sup>

There remains but one point to cover in connection with Jonson, namely, his influence. From the fact of the widely recognized leadership of the critic, would naturally follow the inference that he did not preach in vain. At the very least, a greater consciousness of the rules is revealed after and during the period of his sway. There was, of course, no widespread eagerness to observe the unities, nor was such a result to be expected. Many who showed a disposition to praise, showed none to follow. As a matter of fact, Jonson’s outspoken disciples in this principle are but few, and none too faithful. Of these, the first in date (as far as I have discovered) is Lodowick Barry, who, in his play *Ram-Alley* (1611) says:

“Home-bred mirth our Muse doth sing;  
The satyr’s tongue and waspish sting,  
Which most do hurt when least suspected,  
By this play are not affected.  
But if conceit with quick-turn’d scenes,  
Observing all those ancient streams,

<sup>79</sup> The only thing that can be construed as a possible form of this is the allusion to “the apprehension of their Auditory” (see above).

<sup>80</sup> Professor Spingarn (*17th Cent. Crit. Essays*, Vol. 1, Intro. p., XVI ff.) makes much of this influence, nor is it unlikely. Of the Dutch he says: “While Italian critics were losing themselves in the quagmires of ‘metaphysical’ wit, the Dutch continued the earlier traditions of Italian classicism, inherited from the Aristotelian commentaries of Robortelli and Vettori and the systematic treatises of Scaliger and Minturno.”

Which from the Horse-foot fount do flow,  
As time, place, person, etc.''<sup>81</sup>

This, of course, is strict Jonsonese. Another dramatist, Thomas Heywood, reveals a knowledge of the agitation for the unities. In his Preface of 1615 to the play *The Four Apprentices of London*, written "some fifteene or sixteene yeares" earlier, Heywood thus expresses himself:

"It (the play) comes short of that accurateness both in Plot and Stile, that *these more Censorious dayes with greater curiosity acquire*. . . . That as Playes were then some fifteene or sixteene yeares agoe it was in the Fashion."<sup>82</sup>

This statement is of special interest in that it points out the growing desire for classical "decorum,"—a desire which is to be credited entirely to Jonson. Heywood again defends his refusal to join the standard in a later play, *The Iron Age, Part I.*

"this Poem: Which as it exceeds the strict limits of the ancient Comedy in form, so it trancends them many degrees; both in fulness of the Scene, an grauity of the Subject."<sup>83</sup>

Still another general reference to rules is found in the Prologue to Middleton's masque, *The World Lost at Tennis* (1620):

"This our device we do not call a play,  
Because we break the stage's law to-day  
Of acts and scenes."<sup>84</sup>

One of those dramatists who were unstinting in their praise of Jonson, but were unable or unwilling to follow his precept and his example, was Ford.<sup>85</sup> In the Prologue to *Perkin Warbeck* he gives voice to his consciousness of the difficulty that Jonson had already conceded in *Sejanus*. He knows of "limited scenes," would fain not "outrun the apprehension of his Auditory," but is helpless, as

<sup>81</sup> Prologue to *Ram-Alley or Merrie Trickes* (Hazlitt's Dodsley, Vol. 10, p. 269). The passage has already been compared with the one from Jonson's *Volpone*.

<sup>82</sup> Wks., London, 1874, Vol. II, p. 162.

<sup>83</sup> Idem., Vol. 3, p. 261. The play was printed in 1632.

<sup>84</sup> Wks., ed. Dyce, Vol. 5, p. 161.

<sup>85</sup> Ford wrote one of the commendatory verses in *Jonsonus Virbius*, *On the Best of English Poets, Ben Jonson, Deceased.* (Cunningham, IX, p. 467.)

"We cannot limit scenes, for the whole land  
 Itself appeared too narrow to withstand  
 Competitors for kingdoms. . . ."

The most thorough-going of Jonson's disciples is Richard Brome, whom we have already had occasion to notice. The younger dramatist always acknowledged the desirability of laws, though he was not in all instances faithful in observance to the rules of unity.<sup>86</sup> In the Epilogue to *The Love-Sick Court* he cries out against all errors of the theatre:

"Wishing as y'are judges in the cause  
 You judge but by the antient Comick Lawes.  
 Not by their course who in this latter age  
 Have shown such pleasing errors on the stage,  
 Which he [the author] no more will chuse to imitate  
 Then they to fly from truth, and run the state.<sup>87</sup>

It is well here, having reached the termination of the first part of our survey, to sum up the Elizabethan attitude. The main heads of this summary have already been indicated. It may be said that, in general, the position of the dramatist or critic of this age is one of indifference to the question of the unities; it is never a vital issue with him; so much so, that he is sometimes suspected, without warrant, surely, of having been in utter ignorance of the laws. Jonson's is the only sustained voice in defense of regularity, and even he falls far short of the invincible rigidness of the Italian or the later French attitude. We must ask ourselves, therefore: How is it that the English stage failed to come under the restraints to which the Italian and the French drama succumbed with such ease and servility? The answer seems to lie in the fact that the English tradition, still alive, still active, and as yet unconquerable, clashed with the foreign neo-classic tendency, and the latter went down to defeat. The mediaeval miracle plays, mysteries, and interludes, crude, earth-born and acknowledging no restraints, were still rejoicing in much of their early vigor. The Elizabethan dramatist, even if he had wished, dared not turn his back upon them. They had long reigned the favorites of the

<sup>86</sup> E. g., in *The Sparagus Garden* (pr. 1640). Even here, Brome, in the Prologue, refers favorably to the "Lawes of Comedy."

<sup>87</sup> Wks., Vol. 2, p. 86.

populace and the latter were steadfast in their allegiance. In France the peasantry had been compelled to give up this form of pleasure; but in England they had never surrendered their ancient performances;—neither the Black Death nor their Great War had made them forget. Thus, the crude dramas, born within the sacred portals of the Church, seemed to be endowed with something of its wondrous vitality. But, apart from the people, the purely literary tradition was discouraging to the foreign restrictions. As Professor Saintsbury puts it, “The huge mysteries of the Middle Ages, which ranged from Heaven to Hell, which took weeks to act, and covered millenia in their action, did at least this good to the English and some other theatres—that they familiarised the mind with the neglect of their verisimilitude.”<sup>88</sup> So that the imagination, that “sovereign quickener,” was left uncurbed, and under the wizard influence of such as Marlowe and Dekker and Shakespeare, it continued ranging, ever farther, seeking new lands and strange sights and novel experiences. No better illustration of this is needed than Shakespeare’s reply—*The Tempest*—to the challenge of the critics,—and we can but hope that there *was* a challenge and that “*The Tempest*” *is* his reply.<sup>89</sup> Here the unities of time and place are intact, but the Poet has given Prospero a magic wand, and so the storm, and the shipwreck, and the whole fairy fabric are entirely credible, entirely possible and natural. As one commentator<sup>90</sup> says, “If a writer puts his hero on a magic courser that can

‘Put a girdle round the earth  
In forty minutes,’

<sup>88</sup> *Hist. of Crit.*, Vol. 2, p. 88. Professor Saintsbury, in stressing this idea, forgets to mention the seemingly contradictory fact of the French miracle plays—coeval in origin with the English, of the same structure (sometimes even to minutiae) yet—and in this lies the distinction—without the vitality. This is due entirely to the difference in the social conditions of the lower classes of the two countries. For a fine statement of the case see Morandi, *Voltaire contre Shakespeare*, p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> We should not forget, of course, the influence of the romantic plays of Beaumont and Fletcher. See, for this, the admirable and convincing study in literary affiliation by Professor A. H. Thorndike, *The Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Shakespeare*, 1901.

<sup>90</sup> Pye (*op. cit.*, p. 133).

it is no offense against the rule; but it would be a great one to make an army march from London to Edinburgh in one night."

How distressing this unbridled fancy, this insatiable "curiosity" was to Jonson we have already seen. He represents the reactionary spirit, and, indeed, it may be permitted us to think that there was a certain need for some such restraining influence. Not that it had been well if a check of censorship had been imposed upon the wonder-working flights of fancy. Indeed, I echo cordially the sentiment of the Marquise who wrote to Horace Walpole, "But for the failure of the three unities, far from being shocked by it, I approve of it, there result from it such grand beauties."<sup>91</sup> Yet it has been too customary, in our worship of these beauties, to lose sight of the desirability in all things of the eminently Greek virtue of measure,—and the unities are nothing if not a principle of measure.<sup>92</sup> Viewed from the standpoint of modern stage-craft, the Elizabethan plays are assuredly not above criticism for their defiance of the unities of place and action. As regards the remaining unity, the accusation so often repeated from Whetstone to Jonson, of the violent transgression of the time limit will hardly apply to the dramas under discussion. But I venture to say that, considered as plays for the stage, many of the finest Elizabethan dramas are marred by the continual and unsystematic changes of scene. They give one the impression of "moving pictures," of things seen through a kaleidoscope; they compel our curtain of to-day to rise and fall endlessly, and the intervals for scenic change prolong the work to disproportionate lengths. For us, the best of Shakespeare's tragedies—if we wish to know them in their entirety—must remain great closet-dramas, inimitable, gripping and Titanic, with the supreme perfection and the higher unity of a work of nature. Their poetry, endowed with a universality and an imaginative power truly sublime, reached the height of Elizabethan effort. Add to this their unfailing suggestiveness—

<sup>91</sup> The Marquise du Duffand in Letter of June 28, 1768. Her *Letters* 1810, Vol. 1, p. 244. Quoted from Lounsbury, *Sh. & Voltaire (Sh. Wars,* Vol. 2, p. 265).

<sup>92</sup> Vd. Professor Butcher as quoted on p. 2.

"Age cannot wither, nor custom stale their infinite variety"—and we know, partly, the wherefore of our awe. It is not necessary to believe, even if we were so disposed, that Shakespeare was free from the limitations of his age; and we know that, happily, a lack of restraint and measure,—an abandon to the new-born might of the imagination, to the craving for the novel and the miraculous, is characteristic of the time. That the bent was native and had been early instilled and carefully nurtured, served but to give it the greater strength.

The striking instance, however, of the tendency under consideration is that evinced by the Elizabethan treatment of the unity of action. It has been customary with critics to hold that this unity was generally assented to and preserved by dramatists as well as theorists. We have watched the subordination of the unity of action, beginning with Italian critical speculation and running through Elizabethan theory and practice.<sup>93</sup> That this disregard of Aristotle's prime law is a marked feature of many Elizabethan plays, including several of the best of Shakespeare's, can admit of no doubt, it appears to me. Nor is it difficult to find the causes that brought about the change. They are two-fold. In the first place, the unity of action in its strict Aristotelian acceptance, is far from the unity of a Shakespearean play as two things can possibly be.<sup>94</sup> The former springs from the controlling exigencies of the Greek theatre, as is universally admitted. The latter has the "loose unity" of a romantic work, for, as Professor Moulton says, "The Romantic Drama reproduces the whole of the Classical Drama without its limitations."<sup>95</sup> The Greek idea is, in the nature of things, definite, exclusive and centralized; the Elizabethan, equally in the nature of things, vague, unrestricted and irregular.

<sup>93</sup> Jonson is a good example for praxis as well as theory. To have included in this paper a detailed discussion of tragi-comedy—a broad highway leading to the transgression of the unity of action—would have led us far afield.

<sup>94</sup> Vd. L. Horton Smith, *Ars Tragica Sophoclea cum Shaksperiana comparata*, 1896.

<sup>95</sup> *The Ancient Classical Drama*, 1890, p. 433. This phrase must be taken with reservations in both its terms.

The second cause can now be looked into. Professor Lounsbury points out that the rise and development of the "love" motive had been perhaps most prominent in freeing the English drama from the tyranny of the unities. With this view I can hardly agree, for it seems to me that the theme of the natively independent love, so unlike the early French dramatic love-element, is but one of the concomitants of "romanticism."<sup>96</sup> For the Elizabethan neglect of the unity of action, or at the very least its sweeping departure from the Greek notion, we have already partly accounted, as one of the natural results of the tendencies of the age.<sup>97</sup> But, more definitely, may we not consider that the sources of the plays in the golden age of our drama would result in a natural and insuperable tendency to subvert the unity of action? The influence in this direction of the chronicle, of the English tale, of the Italian *novella*, must not be minimized.

We may sum up then by saying that, in all the three unities, the dramatists of our first period had drifted away from the Greek ideal—certainly not one of neo-classic rigor—in both spirit and letter. Nor, more happily, had the Italian tradition been able to sap the vigor and early might of our drama. The second period, however, was to be one of general conformity, under the more successful inspiration of French example and precept.

<sup>96</sup> It might be added that the love system in Spain was, as in France, thoroughly under parental direction, yet the fact seems to have exerted no influence on the romantic drama of the former country.

<sup>97</sup> The thought that Professor Saintsbury emphasizes—that of the fundamental difference between the French and the English people with regard to submission to authority—must not be forgotten.

It is needless, for the purpose of this paper, to give more than a brief summary of the involved and at times acrimonious dispute over the unities in France. The question has been studied in its various phases, though not, so far as I am aware, by one scholar in its completeness.<sup>1</sup> From the very first, French dramatists and French theorists fell ready victims to the neoclassic influence in this, as in other matters. They were armed with no national traditions to render them proof against foreign literary encroachment and conquest,—and Italian thought soon held almost undisputed sway in France. “The Pléiade made closer and closer approximations to the absolute Trinity of Unities”,<sup>2</sup> and this tendency was gradual until it triumphed in the rigor of Chapelain and the Academy. As Dannheisser puts it, “Ihre (the French dramatists’) Muse machte die Bekanntschaft der Regeln und diese werden schliesslich, wie *Tartuffe*, dem Herrn des Hauses die Thüre weisen.”<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the note of opposition was by no means faint, even from the very start,<sup>4</sup>—and the chorus of the dissentient was strengthened in time. Hardy, Scudéry, Balzac, Ogier, and many another are more or less outspoken against strict construction of the rules. The first—a dramatist chiefly—says, “mais de vouloir restreindre une Tragédie dans les bornes d’une Ode ou d’une Elegie, cela ne se peut ny ne se doit.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Vd. Dannheisser, Hunger, Kuhr, Vial et Denise,—in Bibliography.

<sup>2</sup>Saintsbury, *Hist. of Crit.* vol. 2, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup>Op. cit. p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Jean de Beaubreuil, and De Laudun, (Vd. Spingarn, *Hist.* etc., Section on Unities in France.)

<sup>5</sup>*Théâtre*, V. III, Au Lecteur.

Scudéry speaks of "ces bornes trop estroites",<sup>6</sup> and Ogier, with the nearest approach to the independence of de Laudun, or of Ricci among the Italians, proves, from the practice of the ancients, that "les plus excellents maistres due mestier n'ont pas toujours observé ceste reigle, que nos critiques veulent nous faire garder si religieusement a ceste heure." The "reigle" he is speaking of is the unity of time, which for him is "entre deux soleils".<sup>7</sup>

In reading the opinions of these critics and dramatists, one is struck by the noteworthy fact that not a single man of them is willing to go the full gamut of opposition. A certain air of hesitancy, of readiness to hedge and compromise, is in evidence everywhere in their theorizing. The fact is that the French drama was linked to the Italian with too many and too close bonds; and innovation was not to be thought of. From the time of Jean de la Taille's first formulation of the rules (1572) to the year 1630, the Italian tradition was strengthening its influence on French soil, and in the latter year it became paramount. Thus, 1630 was the date when the unities are recognized as hard and fast rules of the French stage. Nor was the tide to be stemmed by casual voices of remonstrance, like that of Desmarests de Saint-Sorlin, who, in *Les Visionnaires*, attacked the rules with wit and adroitness.<sup>8</sup>

Just as Jean de la Taille was the first in France to formulate the rules, so Chapelain was the first to bind them into a code, and with the aid of Richelieu and his Academy, to make them gospel. It would be a needless digression to enter here into the particulars of the "Cid-strife", which led to the unbending attitude of the Academy on the question. Corneille, the chief dramatic figure of the day, was forced to

<sup>6</sup> *Ligdamon et Lidias* (1631).

<sup>7</sup> *Préface à.....Tyre et Sidon de Jean de Schelandre—1628.*

<sup>8</sup> E. g.—"Si l'on void qu'un sujet se passe en plus d'un jour,  
L'Autheur, dit on alors, m'a fait un mauvais tour;  
Il m'a fait sans dormir passer des nuits entieres  
Excusez le pauvre homme, il a trop de matieres."

kiss the rod of authority, in penitence for a latitude which Richelieu feared would tend to undermine the Academy's autocracy. Corneille's recantation made, the French stage was henceforth to be in the grip of 'the Unities';—no further heresy was tolerated, nor indeed attempted,—so that to the end of the 17th century, French critics,—Boileau, Dacier, D'Aubignac, LeBossu, Rapin,—do nothing more than re-mince the "mincings" of their fore-runners, both native and Italian.

It is well to sum up at this stage, the contribution of French speculation on our subject. To begin with, the French theorists, with their genius for codification, worked out the corollaries that follow from rigid enforcement of the minor unities—the *liaison* of acts and of scenes. In his third *Discours*, Corneille expressed his desire for "the exact adjustment of all parts of a tragedy", and deduces the two *liaisons*. As early a playwright as Hardy,—by no means a rigorous conformist—had announced a preference for a certain kind of *liaison*. He says, "J'approuve fort une grande douceur au vers, une liaison sans jours."<sup>9</sup> With Corneille, *liaison* is, at first, not a rule of the stage; he affirms this in saying that "liaison que unit toutes les actions particulières de chaque acte l'une avec l'autre est *un grand ornement dans un poème*",<sup>10</sup> and this after having conformed to it for a generation and more. The fact is important, for we find in Corneille's discussion the source of the *liaison des scènes* of Dryden and other English critics.

Another topic that merits attention is the French treatment of the vexed question of verisimilitude. Here again the theorists—like their English imitators—invoke the aid of rational precision and "common-sense". D'Aubignac is naively dogmatic on this point: "Les règles du théâtre ne sont pas fondées en autorité, mais en raison. Elles ne sont pas établies sur l'exemple, mais sur le jugement naturel",<sup>11</sup>—and

<sup>9</sup>*Théâtre*, vol. 3, *idem*.

<sup>10</sup>Dryden and others in England class *liaison* with the "mechanic graces" of a play.

<sup>11</sup>*Pratique*, II, 4.

these views are the direct outcome of the reasoning of Chapelain. The latter, in his *Sentiments de l'Académie sur le Cid* (1638) delivers himself of the following weighty considerations: "The beauty of a drama is measured, not by the pleasure it gives, but by its conformity to the rules. If an irregular play, full of disorder and confusion, has any elements of pleasure in it, they are due to whatever regularity the author has included. If on the other hand, some regular dramas give little satisfaction, 'il ne faut pas croire que ce soit la faute des règles, mais bien celle des auteurs, dont le sterile génie n'a pu fournir à l'art matière qui fust assez riche.'"<sup>12</sup>

Having taken this as his unshakeable axiom, Chapelain is ready to go to any length in establishing the rules. Indeed, he says, "The essential rule of the theatre is *la vraisemblance*, and not *le vrai*,—which latter cannot be *vraisemblable*."<sup>13</sup> And again, "The rule of the three unities is necessary for the production of *vraisemblance*." In keeping with this narrow spirit —already familiar to us in Italian theorizing—Mairet, in his "Preface de *Silvanir*" (1631), argues for the unity of twenty-four hours. On the unity of place his comments are something like those of Sidney:—"Il est impossible que l'imagination ne se refroidisse, et qu'une si soudaine mutation de scène ne la suprenne et ne la dégouste extrêmement, s'il faut qu'elle courre toujours après son objet de province en province, et que presqu'en un moment elle passe les monts et traverse les mers avec luy."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Compare the almost verbatim agreement with this, of the coterie of Rymer, Dennis, Jeremy Collier, *et al.* Against the views of Chapelain, Ragan inveighs in a letter to Menage, 17 octobre, 1654, (quoted Vial et Denise, p. 106 note).

<sup>13</sup> *Lettre sur l'art dramatique*, 1630.

<sup>14</sup> Boileau (*L'Art Poet.* III, 45 ff.) cries out against this misuse of the imagination, in words that Soame has well rendered:

"Your place of action must be fixed, and rest.  
A Spanish poet may with good event  
In one day's space whole ages represent;  
There oft the hero of the wandering stage  
Begins the child and ends the play of age....."

Such are the shackling views that led the really logical mind of Corneille into the absurdities of fine-spun reasoning. With true dramatic instinct he realized, and even made bold to say at first, that the unities do not conserve *vraisemblance*. But the evil genius of the day made it impossible for him to maintain a consistently independent attitude, and led him to make concessions that proved fatal. He seeks to justify the law of time by a wrenching of the Aristotelian "imitation". As tragedy, he says, imitates human life, it is necessary that the representation of life it gives should last exactly as long as the actual incidents in real life would last. This is imitation in a lifeless, literal sense. How impossible it is to follow the rule rigorously is evident enough to Corneille, though he dodges the issue quite skilfully. The *Discours* will always stand as an instance of genius sadly misdirected.

Yet another feature of the French treatment of the unities is that the unity of action comes again into its own—and with a vengeance. The tendency culminates in the definitions and explanations of Corneille. He says, for instance, "L'unité d'action consiste dans la comedie, en l'unité d'intrigue ou d'obstacle aux desseins des principaux acteurs, et en l'unité de péril dans la tragédie." But he is not opposed to having several "dangers" in tragedy, nor more than one intrigue in comedy, providing they are well articulated. Corneille is most rigorous with regard to the major unity,—and the majority of his *Examens* are taken up with it. It was not long before the actions of French plays were reduced to slender, attenuate threads.

The French critics, as is seen, inherit the mantle of Italian theorizing, and wear it with graceful attitudinizings of

One Spanish playwright who is in essential disagreement with Boileau is Tirso de Molina. In *Cigarrales de Toledo* he includes a play of his own, *El Vergonzoso en Palacio*, where one of the characters says—"How can a gallant fall in love with a lady, court her, treat her, win her and marry her, all in a day?"

(*Vd. Bulletin Hispanique*, 1901-2, Ed. M. Morel-Fatio. Quoted from Saintsbury's *Loci Critici*.)

their own. Imagination,—the free swing of fancy—is a dead letter to them, a thing undreamt of. The reign of reason is supreme. It remains for us to see how the English drama fell under this benumbing spell. It is going too far, however, to ridicule without reserve, the attitude of the French theorists. Unsparring condemnation of this sort is often prompted by lack of sympathy—national or other. Therefore, it is well to remember that we must view as expressions of national tendencies both the French Academy and the opinions it has moulded,—and that to these belongs the credit of what is most valuable in French literature, notably the fine flavor and the sparkling clearness of the language. If, then, French teaching was not a happy force in the English drama at a time when that drama had but few, if any, inherent elements of greatness,—how noble was the atonement of this same teaching in helping to create, at last, English prose—lucid, racy, and strong. Such is the prose of Dryden, the central figure of our second period. At this day, when Dryden is perhaps coming to his own as a literary critic, may we not speculate upon how far his perfect medium of expression aided him in attaining, every now and then, the ring of modernness so peculiar to him?

Dryden's pronouncements on the unities are the largest in bulk of any English critic. Unfortunately, however, here, as in so many other things, Dryden does not maintain a consistent policy or set of ideas, nor can we trace in him the slow growth of the hardening classicism that is evident in Jonson. On the other hand, he is akin to Jonson in seizing every opportunity for giving utterance to critical thought. Prolegomena to plays, prologues and epilogues, defenses, essays—all were vehicles for the thought of an eminently critical and fundamentally logical mind.

It will best serve the purpose of this study to take up Dryden's views in chronological order. In this connection the interesting paper by Mr. Wm. E. Bohn, on *Dryden's Literary Criticism*<sup>15</sup> may be used as a check. Mr. Bohn divides Dry-

<sup>15</sup> *Modern Lang. Ass'n, Pub.*, 1907, no. 3.

den's life and critical activity into five periods: of alternate independence and classic "rationalism". As Dryden had not turned his attention to the unities during the first of these periods, we can begin with the second, which Mr. Bohn dates from 1666 to 1675. Within these time limits,—when Dryden was "the favorite of the court", and "a court critic"—falls the major portion of his exposition of the unities.

The earliest reference, somewhat indirect, that I have noted occurs in the Dedication to the *Indian Emperor* (1667).<sup>16</sup> Dryden shows he is aware of the rules and of French example, when he says, "It (the play) is an irregular piece, if compared with many of Corneille's". The next year, 1668, (the "unities" year, *par excellence*) Dryden has become a conformist,—though with a certain doubt and reservation which he is never at pains to suppress. Both these facts are apparent in the first Prologue to the *Maiden Queen* (1668):<sup>17</sup>

### I.

"He who writ this, not without pains and thought,  
From French and English theatres has brought  
The exactest rules, by which a play is wrought.

### II.

The unities of action, place and time;  
The scenes unbroken;<sup>18</sup> and a mingled chime  
Of Jonson's humour, with Corneille's rhyme.

### III.

But while dead colours he with care did lay,  
He fears his wit, or plot, he did not weigh,  
Which are the living beauties of a play.

<sup>16</sup>Works ed. Scott-Saintsbury, vol. 2, p. 282.

<sup>17</sup>idem, p. 422.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Shadwell, *infra*, on "scenes unbroken".

The same fear is expressed in the Preface to the work,<sup>19</sup>—“For what else concerns this play, I would tell the reader that it is regular, according to the strictest of dramatic laws; but that is a commendation which many of our poets now despise, and a beauty which our common audiences do not easily discern. Neither indeed do I value myself upon it; because, with all that symmetry of parts, it may want an air and spirit (which consists in the writing) to set it off.”

This saving sense of the “air and spirit” characterizes all of Dryden’s critical utterances. In his most rigorous moments he is still at bottom aware of something that transcends the rules. He is never a classicist in the grain.

We now come to the justly famous *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668). It is written as a friendly argument among four gentlemen: Crites (Sir Robt. Howard), Neander (Dryden), Lisideius (Sir Chas. Sedley) and Eugenius (Lord Buckhurst). Of the views credited to these men in the *Essay*, it is impossible to speak at length; all that can be attempted here is a summary.

The case for regularity is opened by Crites who (against the real opinion of Sir Robt. Howard) is made to plead for the superiority of the ancients over the moderns and of the French drama over the English. In this he is ably seconded by Lisideius,—so that we get from the two a clear statement of contemporary French theories. Partly unlike Sidney, who, it will be remembered, bases the rules on Aristotle’s precept and the practice of Italian “player”, Crites finds them “extracted” by the French from Aristotle and “Horace”. The compass of time he would make the natural day of twenty-four hours, “or as near it as it can be contrived”. In supporting this view he harks back to the old theory of “verisimilitude”:—“The time”, says he, “of the feigned action or fable of the play, should be proportioned as near as can be to the duration of that time in which it is represented: since, therefore, all plays are acted on the theatre in the space of time much within the compass of

<sup>19</sup>*idem*, p. 418. Cf., also, the Epilogue to the play.

twenty-four hours, that play is to be thought the nearest imitation of nature, whose plot or action is confined within that time." Crites would have, too, the parts of a play "equally subdivided", so that each act may take up a like part of the imagined time. He is well aware of the practice of the ancients as to "the rule of time", and his account of this phase of the Greek drama is finely vivid:—" (The Ancients) set the audience, as it were, at the post where the race is to be concluded; and, saving them the tedious expectation of seeing the poet set out and ride the beginning of the course, they suffer you not to behold him till he is in sight of the goal and just upon you." Toward the unity of place, his attitude is profoundly orthodox. "I will not deny," he says "but, by the variation of painted scenes, the fancy.....may sometimes imagine it several places, with some appearance of probability; yet it still carries the greater likelihood of truth, if those places be supposed so near each other, as in the same town or city, etc....."

One possessed of this high regard for symmetry, may be expected to delight in *liaison des scènes*, and indeed Crites praises the "mechanic grace", as "a good mark of a well-contrived play, when all the persons are known to each other, and every one of them has some affairs with all the rest." Of the unity of action Crites accepts the Greek conception,—everything, "even the obstacles, are to be subservient to it". Double action is an abomination,—"not but that there may be many actions in a play, as Ben Jonson has observed in his 'Discoveries'"; but they must all be true and subordinate underplots. Then as a parting shot he hurls against typically English plays the well-worn charge that, "That which should be the business of a day, takes up in some of them an age; instead of one action, they are the epitomes of a man's life; and for one spot of ground, which the stage should represent, we are sometimes in more countries than the map can show us." Here he may be said to rest his case.

Eugenius takes up the cudgels for the native theatre. He begins by refuting the argument of the authority of the ancients, alleging that "the plots of their plays being narrow, and the persons few, one of their acts was written in less compass than one of our well-wrought scenes". His general views seem to have been those of Dryden who says, "Eugenius, who seemed to have the better of the argument, would urge no farther."<sup>20</sup> Lisideius, while decrying French over-scrupulousness with regard to time, expresses pleasure at their *liaison*, thus allying himself with Crites. The other side is nobly upheld by Neander,—and who does not hear the clear voice of Dryden ringing in the following words: "And this leads me to wonder why Lisideius and many others should cry up the bareness of the French plots, above the variety and copiousness of the English"? A most telling blow is delivered when Neander says, "They (the French) have brought on themselves that dearth of plot, and narrowness of imagination, which may be observed in all their plays. How many beautiful accidents might naturally happen in two or three days, which cannot arrive with any probability in the compass of twenty-four hours?....."

Dryden, then, is by no means, in his theories, a hide-bound follower of the "French" rules. That doubt which he hinted at in his first utterance on the question is here openly declared and defended. To this view he held firm throughout his life, though it must be said, in support of Mr. Bohn's opinions, that there is too often, as in the case under discussion, a wide disparity between Dryden's practice and his criticism. In this, as in the general trend of his thought on the drama, the analogy between him and Corneille is of the closest. Mr. Ker states the case happily<sup>21</sup> in saying, "Dryden's position in criticism is very like that of his two forerunners, Tasso and Corneille, both of whom felt themselves obliged on the one hand to pay reverence to the Ancients, and on the other hand

<sup>20</sup> p. 38 (edition of Wm. Strunk, Jr.).

<sup>21</sup> Vol. I, p. xix, *Essays of John Dryden*.

to consider their own genius and the claims of contemporary fashion."

The same year that gave to the world the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* saw the culmination of the so-called Howard controversy. This little dispute between Sir Robt. Howard and Dryden dated from 1664, when, in the Dedication to *The Rival Ladies*, Dryden advanced a plea for rhyme in plays. With this view Howard disagreed in the Preface to his *Plays* (1665). There was little, if any, animosity between the two at this time as they were actually collaborating on a comedy acted the same year. Dryden's reply—the *Essay* we have just discussed—appeared three years later. By this time the ground of dispute had broadened out and included other questions besides that of rhyme. Howard's retort appeared almost immediately after the *Essay*, in the form of a Preface to the *Great Favourite, or The Duke of Lerma* (1668). On the doctrine of the unities Howard's statement in this Preface is perfectly clear-minded. He says, "To show therefore upon what ill grounds they dictate Lawes for 'Dramatick Poesie' I shall endeavor to make it evident that there is no such thing as what they all pretend; for, if strictly and duly weigh'd, 'tis as impossible for one stage to present two Houses or two Roomes truely, as two Countreys or Kingdomes; and as impossible that five houres should be two houres and a halfe, as that a thousand houres or yeares should be less than what they are;" etc. Nevertheless, Howard is not dogmatic on the matter. His readiness to leave it to the author's discretion is admirably cool-headed. "I would," says he, "have all attempts of this nature be submitted to the fancy of others, and bear the name of Propositions, not of Confident Lawes, or Rules made by Demonstration; and then I shall not discommend any Poet that dresses his play in such a fashion as his fancy best approves; and fairly leave it for others to follow, if it appears to them most convenient, and fullest of ornament."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Yet, as Professor Spingarn points out (*Crit. Essays*, vol. 2, note to p. 108), "Howard finds fault with the laxity of the Spaniards."

But the two playwrights were not to have their quarrel entirely to themselves. In the Preface to the *Sullen Lovers* (1668) Thomas Shadwell is obviously taking his stand on a mooted question.<sup>23</sup> As a professed disciple of Jonson,<sup>24</sup> Shadwell is committed to regularity, and his Preface dispels all doubts on the point:—

“I have in this play, as near as I could, observed the three Unities of Time, Place and Action; the time of the Drama does not exceed six hours, the place is a very narrow compass, and the Main Action of the Play, upon which all the rest depend, is the Sullen Love betwixt *Stanford* and *Emelia*, which kind of love is only proper to their Characters. I have here, as often as I could naturally, kept the scenes unbroken, which (though it be not so much practiced, or so well understood, by the English) yet among the French Poets is accounted a great Beauty.”<sup>25</sup>

Further on in the Preface, however, Shadwell admits frankly and fully, the difficulty of observing the unities in their straitest sense: “Nor can you expect,” says he, “a very Correct Play, under a Year’s pain at the least, from the Wittiest Man of the Nation; it is so difficult to write well in this kind.”

Perhaps the most striking feature of the controversy thus far is that, in essentials, the opinions of the three dramatists coincide;—they are all liberal in their views, though Howard is perhaps the most so,—and one wonders at this much ado

<sup>23</sup> “In his first Comedy Shadwell had caricatured Howard as the positive knight, and in the ‘Preface’ had attacked Dryden’s ‘Essay on Dramatic Poesy’”—Ward, *Hist.* etc. vol. 3, p. 356, note 3.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. The Prologue to his *Squire of Alsacia*,

“Pray let a Comedy once more be grac’d:  
Which does not Monsters represent but men,  
Conforming to the rules of Master Ben.”

Ben, as we have noted, was still flourishing in his “mastership.”

<sup>25</sup> Yet, Shadwell says in the Prologue to his *Libertine*, that it is “the most irregular Play upon the Stage.”

about nothing. Nor is their attitude unlike that of Corneille when he makes bold to declare the views closest to his heart.

The only other document in the controversy—for the chief disputants were soon after reconciled—is Dryden's *Defense of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy*.<sup>28</sup> This work, while by no means acrimonious, is more direct than the others in its statements,—as Dryden later realized with regret. In effect, the *Defense* is a re-statement of the critic's position as already elaborated in the *Essay*—even to the quoting of some of his earlier *dicta*. In the heat of refutation, Dryden is impelled to go further than perhaps he would otherwise have gone. He is ready to grant Howard's contention that the stage cannot be two places,—"yet the stage may properly represent them, successively, or at several times, . . . . We distinguish place, as it relates to plays, into real and imaginary. The real place is that theatre, or piece of ground, on which the play is acted. The imaginary, that house, town, or country where the action of the drama is supposed to be." This leads our theorist directly to the question of the imagination. "The imagination of the audience, aided by the words of the poet and painted scenes, may suppose the stage to be sometimes one place, sometimes another." Dryden then goes on—with too servile following of the French—to hem in this imagination most wofully. It is to be dutiful, and accommodate its pace to that of the more sober reason. "Reason, therefore, can sooner be led by imagination to step from one room into another, than to walk to two distant houses, and yet rather go thither, than to fly like a witch through the air, and be hurried from one region to another. Fancy and reason go hand in hand; the first cannot leave the last behind; and though fancy, when it sees the wide gulf, would venture over as the nimbler, yet it is withheld by reason, which will refuse to take the leap, when the distance before it appears too large."

In his summary, Dryden points out the underlying difference between tragedy and comedy with regard to the time

<sup>28</sup> Prefixed to the second edition of the *Indian Emperor* (1668).

unity. He here expresses what Jonson must have realized more than once, and as a matter of fact, he justifies the contrast by appealing to the practice of the earlier dramatist. Says Dryden, "In comedy I would not exceed twenty-four hours or thirty hours; for the plot, accidents, and persons of comedy are small and may be naturally turned into a little compass: but in tragedy the design is weighty, and the persons great; therefore there will naturally be required a greater space of time in which to move them."<sup>27</sup>

This completes Dryden's "second period". His main contributions to dramatic criticism belong to this time. Henceforth his ideas on play-making are to appear as occasional utterances only, and he is to show a leaning to one side or the other as circumstances, and the play in hand, compel. This latter is so evident that it becomes practically impossible to divide his critical tenets, considered from the standpoint of the unities, into hard and fast "periods".

The criticism we have reviewed reveals Dryden in the attitude of a compromiser, an opportunist. He unites in himself the ancient tradition as modified by contemporary French theorizing, with the characteristic independence of the Englishman. The unity of time he views with more than the laxity of Corneille, yet he asserts its desirability for comedy. On place he is narrower and more dogmatic, and unfortunately falls under the spell of the fine-spun speculation of French sophists. As regards the unity of action, Dryden is his true self again. He recoils from the "thin, abstract plots" of one rather common variety of French comedy, and declares in favor of the fuller, more robust, and more rounded plays of the English. Nor is he prepared to shudder at plentiful episodes and

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Preface to *Tyrannic Love*, 1670. (Wks. ed. Scott-Saintsbury, vol. iii, p. 379): "The scenes are everywhere unbroken, and the unities of place and time more exactly kept, than perhaps is required in a tragedy, or at least, than I have since preserved them in 'The Conquest of Granada.'"

well-hinged sub-plots.<sup>28</sup> Thus his dramatic tenets are a subtle combination of the "classic" and the "romantic",—which perhaps accounts for some of the charges of inconsistency so frequently leveled against him. It must be said that neither he nor any of his contemporaries was able to see the slightest incongruity in this admixture. It was the common heritage of the time.<sup>29</sup> Yet the note of modernness that I claimed for Dryden is nowhere so apparent as at this period. To him it was given—and to few others of his time—to atone for errors by true critical appreciation, which is only another word for insight. When he says, "The French have brought on themselves that dearth of plot, and narrowness of imagination, which may be observed in all their plays. How many beautiful accidents might naturally happen in two or three days, which cannot arrive with any probability in the compass of twenty-four hours?"<sup>30</sup> . . . . he soars high above the Rymers and Colliers of the age. Who can doubt that it was the influence of views such as these, that led St. Evremond to express his consciousness of the same fact?—"Il faut aimer la règle pour éviter la confusion; il faut aimer le bon sens qui modere l'ardeur d'une imagination allumée; mais il faut ôter à la règle toute contrainte qui gesne, et bannir une raison scrupuleuse qui, par un trop grand attachement à la justesse, ne laisse pas rien de libre et de naturel."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Cf. what he says in the Dedication of the 3rd part of his *Poetical Miscellanies* (1693): "As little can I grant that the French dramatik writers excel the English—they content themselves with a thin design without esipodes, and managed by few persons; our audience will not be pleased but with variety of accidents, and underplot, and many actors. They follow the ancients too servilely in the mechanic rules; and we assume too much license to ourselves in keeping them only in view, at too great distance."—(*Miscel. Wks.* ed. Malone, 1800, vol. 3, p. 278). With the above should be compared the words of St. Evremond, *De la Comedie Angloise* (*Oeuvres Meslees*, 1689, p. 577).

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Ker (*op. cit.* p. xxxviii, vol I.).

<sup>30</sup>p. 61, ed. Strunk.

<sup>31</sup>*idem*, p. 577.

The remaining *loci* in Dryden can be considered briefly. The first comes in the Preface (1678) to *All for Love*. In the interim Dryden had formed the friendship of Rymer (who, in spite of his critical opinions may have been a very estimable gentleman) and, in addition, had become subject to the influence of Rapin and Bossu. This prepares us for a period of relative narrowness in criticism, and such was the case, at least with regard to the unities. He says, "The fabric of the play is regular enough,—and the Unities of Time, Place, and Action, more exactly observed, than perhaps the English theatre requires. Particularly the action is so much one that it is the only of the kind without episode or underplot."<sup>32</sup> But he will not forego the cherished principle of the English latitude of action,—"Yet though their models (of the ancients) are regular, they are too little for English tragedy; which requires to be built in a larger compass."<sup>33</sup>

In the same year was written the *Heads of an Answer to Rymer's remarks on the 'Tragedies of the Last Age'*. Here again he applauds the English freedom of plot.<sup>34</sup> In a somewhat narrower vein he speaks in the *Grounds of Criticism*, prefixed to *Troilus and Cressida* (1679). The action must be one, for a double action distracts the attention of the audience. So that, at the end of Mr. Bohn's third period (which he calls one of critical independence) we find Dryden imbued with classical ideas of the unities, and hearkening, in this, most readily to authority.

Dryden next touches upon the rules in the Preface to *The Spanish Friar* (1681).<sup>35</sup> In this he avows wilful disobedience to the "ancient" canons: "There are evidently two actions [in the play]; but it will be clear to any judicious man, that with

<sup>32</sup>Ker, Vol. 1, p. 92.

<sup>33</sup>*idem*, p. 200.

<sup>34</sup>Vol. xv, p. 388, (*Wks.* ed. Scott-Saintsbury).

<sup>35</sup>This is in Mr. Bohn's fourth period (1680-1689), truly one of "meagre criticism" and a time when our poet is, in general, "coldly rationalistic".

half the pains I could have raised a play from either of them; for this time I satisfied my humour, which was to tack two plays together; and to break a rule for the pleasure of variety.”<sup>86</sup>

The year 1689 begins, according to Mr. Bohn, the final phase,—one of “moral and intellectual independence.” In general this is strikingly true of Dryden’s criticism during this period, though in his practice, as always, he is an opportunist, forced to compromise with the demands of his audience on the one hand, and of the critics on the other. The Preface to *Don Sebastian* (1690) shows the ascendancy of the popular will. “I must,” says Dryden, “declare freely that I have not exactly kept to the three mechanic rules of unity. I knew them, and had them in my eye, but followed them only at a distance; for the genius of the English cannot bear too regular a play: we are given to variety, even to a debauchery of pleasure.....I have taken the time of two days, because.....to gain a greater beauty it is lawful for a poet to supercede a less.”<sup>87</sup> Similarly, in the Preface to *Cleomenes*, Dryden says, excusing a breach of the rule of time, “it is better to trespass on a rule, than leave out a beauty.”<sup>88</sup> Yet again, in the Preface to the 2nd part of his *Poetical Miscellanies* (1693) the thought is thus reiterated: “For many a fair precept in Poetry is like a seeming demonstration in mathematices; very specious in the diagram, but failing in the mechanick operations.”<sup>89</sup>

The same spirit has the upper hand in the Dedication to Dryden’s last play, *Love Triumphant* (1694). Of the rule of time in the drama he says, “that it is much within the compass of an astrological day.” For place he has less, though little less regard. “Some of the late French poets, and,

<sup>86</sup> *Wks.*, *idem*, vol. vi. p. 409.

<sup>87</sup> *Works*, *idem*, Vol. vii, p. 313.

<sup>88</sup> *Idem*, vol. viii, p. 220.

<sup>89</sup> *Crit. & Misc. Works*, ed. Malone 1800, p. 26. Cf. p. 27, “sometimes [I have] very boldly made such expositions of my authors as no Dutch commentator will forgive me”. Another mention of the Dutch occurs on p. 46.

amongst the English my most ingenious friend, Mr. Congreve, have observed this rule strictly. . . I have followed the example of Corneille, and stretched the latitude to a street and palace, not far distant from each other in the same city. They, who will not allow this liberty to a poet, make it a very ridiculous thing for an audience to suppose themselves sometimes to be in a field, sometimes in a garden, and at other times in a chamber. There are not, indeed, so many absurdities in their supposition as in ours; but it is an original absurdity for the audience to suppose themselves to be in any other place than in the very theatre in which they sit, which is neither chamber, nor garden, nor yet a public place of any business, but that of the representation.”<sup>40</sup> The importance of this statement cannot be overestimated. In a flash of intuition, but without following it up, Dryden had hit upon one underlying “absurdity” of all Italian and French and English defenders of verisimilitude. I refer to the merging of audience and actors,—to the projection of the spectators upon the stage, as if they were part and parcel of the performance before them, or held to it the relation of the Greek Chorus. This confounding of two separate and distinct bodies—and its origin is not far to seek—joined to a false notion of imitation, gave rise to the *vraisemblance* that was so highly extolled and so eagerly pursued. To repeat what Dryden says,—“they make it a very ridiculous thing for *an audience to suppose themselves sometimes to be in a field*” etc. Our finical commentators failed to see that the *actors* were “sometimes to be in a field,” and not the audience,—that the spectators are entitled to a certain subtle aloofness from the action on the stage, or there can be no “purgation” of pity and fear. And so the critics, with this spectre of their own conjuring ever present on the boards, cried out to the dramatist to keep it rooted to the spot. Such was the curious blending of actor and auditor—not a surprising result when one remembers that some actors have held that they must always face their audience, and address it solely.

<sup>40</sup>Wks.—ed. Scott-Saintsbury, vol. viii, p. 375.

It will hardly be needful, after what has already been said, to make an extended summary of Dryden's position. The curious strife between his theory and practice has been sufficiently dwelt upon. As Mr. Ker sums it up, "Dryden's theory is wholly independent of his practice, with the possible exception of his heroic plays."<sup>41</sup> Here, as in other matters, Dryden was an opportunist. This fact militates at times against the probity of his criticism,—but it does not prevent his being rated a sound thinker, though one with a lamentable proneness to bow the knee. With him it is a case of the critics *versus* the audience,—yet his own native good taste often frees him from the trammels of both.

Among his English predecessors Dryden owed most to Johnson. The latter's vogue was still to be reckoned with in the second half of the 17th century, and his "mastership" was still attested by numerous dramatists. As regards foreign influence upon Dryden, that of the French is paramount. From Corneille he received the original impulse to critical thought, and "a quickening of interest in critical discussion."<sup>42</sup> But his indebtedness embraces other French writers as well, and he often mirrors the views of Rapin or Bossu, and yet others. More conjectural is his knowledge of D'Aubignac and La Mesnardiére.<sup>43</sup> It can safely be said, however, that Dryden's criticism derives preponderatingly from French sources. From the Italians he gets far less, yet something too from them,—perhaps chiefly through French channels. Other sources are inferential and less positive. With the Dutch he is at least acquainted, and, in addition, strong Spanish influence has been claimed for him by Bolingbroke,<sup>44</sup> though if the latter case were true, Dryden would inevitably have reflected, more certainly than he does, the Spanish desire for liberty in the drama.

<sup>41</sup> Vol. i, p. xi.

<sup>42</sup> *idem*, p. xix.

<sup>43</sup> Vd. Ker and Strunk on this point.

<sup>44</sup> Vd. Spence: *Anecdotes*, etc., 1820, p. 106. Cited by Ker, Vol. i, introduction.

This large borrowing from foreign sources was not, fortunately, to suppress his originality, or undermine the value of his individual contribution to critical thought. Its distinctive and personal qualities impressed a large number of his contemporaries,—and more than one critic was glad to acknowledge him as master. Nor must we underrate the impetus toward the formation of sound critical doctrine that his writings gave the next century. From a number of standpoints, then, his Essays and Prefaces are documents of prime significance. As Mr. Ker puts it, “The fault of his prefaces is that they make one disappointed with his plays, when one comes to them after his criticisms.”<sup>45</sup> It is not, perhaps, too much to say that Dryden is destined to be a figure of increasing prominence in English literary criticism, as the critical study of that subject advances.

<sup>45</sup>Ker *op. cit.* vol. i, p. xx.

In endeavoring to give a compact, and, as far as possible, a unified survey of Dryden's pronouncements on the unities, we have displaced from their chronological position a little coterie of minor critics and dramatists. Among the earliest of these is Sir Samuel Tuke, who reiterates the old familiar censure against the English stage,—

“Here’s a fine play indeed, to lay the scene  
 In three houses of the same town, O mean !  
 Why, we have several plays, where I defy  
 The devil to tell where the scene does lie :  
 Sometimes in *Greece*, and then they make a step  
 To *Transylvania*, thence at one leap  
 To *Greece* again ; this shows a ranging brain,  
 Which scorns to be confined t’*a town in Spain*.

The possible Adventures of Five Hours !  
 A copious design ! Why in some of ours [English plays]  
 Many of the adventures are impossible,  
 Or, if it be achiev’d, no man can tell  
 Within what time ; this shows a rare invention,  
 When the design’s above your comprehension.”<sup>46</sup>

Another plea for greater regularity,—especially of simplicity in the unity of action, is found in Flecknoe’s *A Discourse of the English Stage* (1664). After pointing out the imperfection of English plays, “excepting onely some few of Jon-

<sup>46</sup> *The Adventures of Five Hours* (1663), in Dodsley, vol. 15, p. 315. That the Spanish Stage was subject to the same Mediaeval influence as the English is evident from the words of Lope de Vega,—*El Nuevo Arte de Hacer Comedias* ;—

“la cólera  
 De un Espanol sentado no se templa  
 Si no le represeten en dos horas  
 Hasta el final juicio desde el Genesis.”  
 —Cited by Mr. Ker.

son's", the writer goes on to say,—“The chief faults of ours are our huddling too much matter together, and making them too long and intricate; we imagining we never have intrigue enough, till we lose ourselves and Auditors, who shu'd be led in a Maze, but not a Mist.”<sup>47</sup>

Milton, in the Preface, *On Tragedy*, to *Samson Agonistes*, (pub. 1671) sums up compactly the classic tenets. We hear again of “verisimilitude” and “decorum”, but, unfortunately, the poet does not give us his understanding of the terms. Says Milton, “It suffices if the whole drama be found not produced beyond the fifth act. Of the style and uniformity, and that commonly called the plot, whether intricate or explicit, which is nothing indeed but such economy, or disposition of the fable as may stand best with verisimilitude and decorum. \* \* \* The circumspection of time, wherein the whole drama begins and ends, is, according to ancient rule and best example, within the space of twenty-four hours.”

It was fitting that Edward Phillips should hold to Milton's opinion in the matter of the unities. In the Preface to *Theatrum Poetarum* (1675), the former says, “I shall only leave it to consideration whether the use of the *Chorus* and the observation of the Ancient Law of Tragedy, particularly as to limit of time, would not rather, by reviving the pristine glory of the Tragicall, advance then diminish the present; . . . . the Indecorums are to be avoided in Tragedy,” etc.<sup>48</sup>

Thomas Rymer, first reader in the English Church of Common Sense, has already been mentioned as the friend of Dryden. He is able to prove, with a commendable attempt at logic, the close correlation of the three unities. “And peradventure,” says he, “if the Poet design any certain sense by his Fable, that sense will bind him to the unity of action; and the unity of action cannot well exceed the rule for time. And these two

<sup>47</sup> Attached to *Love's Kingdom*, a Pastoral *Tragi-Comedy*—in Roxburgh Library, *The Eng. Drama and Stage*, etc. 1869. Also given by Spingarn, *Crit. Essays*, vol. 2, p. 92.

<sup>48</sup> Spingarn, *Crit. Essays*, vol. 2, p. 270.

unities will not permit that the poet can far transgress in the third. So all the regularities seem in a manner to be link'd together."<sup>48</sup> For the rest, his criticism is mainly taken up with the unity of action, of which he has a very exalted opinion."<sup>49</sup>

In a similar strain, despite the influence of Dryden, Nathaniel Lee in the Preface to *Oedipus*<sup>50</sup> (1679) speaks of the superiority of the ancient drama. He is discussing the English underplot, and adds, "Perhaps, after all, if we cou'd think so, the antient Method, as't is the easiest, is also the most natural, and the best: For Variety, as 'tis manag'd, is too often subject to breed Distraction; and while we would please too many ways, for want of Art in the Conduct, we please in none."

Another anxious shielder of the rules is John Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave. His statement is important as revealing his sense of the inadequacy of the practice, compared with the knowledge, of the rules. In the verse *Essay on Poetry*, he says,

"The Unities of Action, Time and Place,  
Which, if observed, give Plays so great a Grace,  
Are, tho' but little practis'd, too well known  
To be taught here; where we pretend alone  
From *nicer* Faults to purge the present Age,  
Less obvious Errors of the English Stage."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> *Tragedies of the Last Age*, etc. 1678, p. 24. Also Spingarn, *idem*, vol. 2, p. 190. Cf. *A short View* 1693, *idem*, p. 209.

<sup>49</sup> See Hofherr, *Rymers dram. Kritik*, p. 28, "Von den Einheiten interessiert ihn [Rymer] eigentlich nur die echte, die der Handlung." Cf. *Tragedies of Last Age*, p. 106 for proof of this.

<sup>50</sup> *Works*, 3 vols. L. 1721—see vol. i, p. 263. This play was written with Dryden as collaborator. Cf. with what Lee says, the following from Langbaine's *Momus Triumphans* 1688: "They (the English drama tists) would have the greater Satisfaction in seeing a *correct Play*, by how much they were capable (by the help of these rules) to discern the Beauties of it."—Preface.

<sup>51</sup> In Earl of Roscommon's *Poems*, 1717, p. 308; also in Sheffield's *Works*, 1726, vol. i, p. 72. Cited, too, by Spingarn *Crit. Essays* v. 2, p. 291. The *Essay on Poetry* was written in 1682.

Despite these earnest desires, the critic, turned playwright, was forced to desert his theoretic standard. In the Prologue to the *Tragedy of Marcus Brutus*, Sheffield reluctantly admits to an infraction of the rule of place:—

“But here our author, besides other faults  
Of ill expressions, and of vulgar thoughts,  
Commits one crime that needs an act of grace,  
And breaks the law of unity of place.”

He then says, almost beseechingly,

“And where can Brutus die but in Philippi field?”<sup>63</sup>

The beginnings of a new tendency appear first in Congreve, in spite of Dryden's claim that his “ingenious friend” was careful in his practice of the rules. While professing an attempt to preserve them intact, Congreve cannot refrain from declaring that he finds them shackling and of secondary importance. “I confess,” says he in the Dedication to *The Double Dealer*, “I designed (whatever vanity or ambition occasioned that design) to have written a true and regular comedy, but I found it an undertaking which put me in mind of *Sudet multum, frustaque laboret aussus idem.*”<sup>64</sup> A decidedly scoffing vein is revealed in his Epilogue to the same play,—

“The lady critics, who are better read,  
Inquire if characters are nicely bred  
They judge of action too, and time and place;  
In which we do not doubt but they're discerning  
For that's a kind of assignation learning.”<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> *Vd. Works of Sheffield, or Duke of Buckinghamshire*, 1753, vol. i, p. 243. The scene of the play is, of course, first Athens, then Philippi field.

<sup>64</sup> *The Comedies of Wm. Congreve*, ed. G. S. Street, 1895, vol. I. The date of the *Double Dealer* is 1693.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *idem* vol. i, p. 100, Dryden, *To My Dear Friend, Mr. Congreve etc.*:

“So bold, yet so judiciously you dare,  
That your least praise is to be regular.  
Time, place, and action may with pains be wrought,  
But genius must be born, and never can be taught.”

From this Farquhar's ridicule of all rules, is but an easy transition.

An important figure in criticism toward the end of the 17th century is John Dennis. He preserves the tradition of the end of the rules, justifying them by an appeal to "Nature." To him, the term is synonymous with "verisimilitude." That he is in essential agreement with Rymer is evident from his letter to Walter Moyle,—yet he is ready to grant, following in the footsteps of Dryden, that genius may overstep the laws and still not fail of greatness. In the letter<sup>66</sup> mentioned, dated Oct. 26, 1695, Dennis writes, "We know indeed very well that a man may write regularly and yet fail of pleasing; and that a Poet may please in a Play that is not regular. But this is eternally true, that he who writes regularly, *caeteris paribus*, must always please more than he who transgresses the rules. Nothing can please in a Play but Nature, no not in a Play which is written against the rules; and the more there is of Nature in any Play, the more that Play must delight. Now the rules are nothing but an Observation of Nature. For Nature is Rule and Order itself: There is not one of the Rules but what might be us'd to evince this." This is even true of the "mechanical rules," says Dennis. He first considers the law of place,—and nowhere is the pathetic fallacy of projecting the audience upon the stage, more apparent than in his discussion of this unity. Says our critic, "It is certain that it is in Nature impossible, for a Man who is in the Square in *Covent Garden*, to see the things that are at the same time transacted in *Westminster*." Concerning the unity of time, his argument would have been sweet and remembered music to the ears of Castelvetro:—"A reasonable man may delude himself so far, as to fancy that he sits for the space of twelve Hours without removing, eating or sleeping, but he must be a Devil that can fancy he does it for a Week." On the unity of action Dennis is similarly narrow.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup>In *Select Works*, 1718 vol. ii, p. 537.

<sup>67</sup>In the same letter, Dennis, à propos of *The Mock Marriage* (1696) by Thomas Scott, scores the author for asserting "dogmatically

In the same year, 1696, appeared Blackmore's *Prince Arthur*. Dennis in his *Remarks*<sup>58</sup> on the "Heroic Poem," scored Blackmore for failing to arrive at just those elements of an epic, that the author had, in his preface,<sup>59</sup> prided himself on attaining. His censure is directed exclusively at Blackmore's ill-success in preserving the unity of action. "Mr. Blackmore's action has neither unity, nor integrity, nor morality, nor universality," says Dennis; certainly an array of faults sufficient to consign any work of art to everlasting perdition. On the same unity Dennis says later, "It is the Propriety or the Impropriety of the Episodes that preserves or corrupts the unity of action."<sup>60</sup>

From his attitude of rule-worship Dennis never departed, though he moderated his views somewhat.<sup>61</sup> In the Preface to *Iphigenia* he writes, "I endeavored to reconcile Variety to Regularity: For Irregularity in the Drama, like Irregularity in Life, is downright extravagance, and extravagance both upon the Stage, and in the World is always either Vice or Folly, and is often both."<sup>62</sup> The "higher strain," however, appears in the next paragraph of the Preface,—"At the same time I am far from thinking that any observation of the Rules can make amends for want of Genius; I have the lesson of my Master too constantly in my mind, to be guilty of such a mistake."<sup>63</sup>

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in his Preface, that he who writes by Rule shall have only his Labour for his Pains".

<sup>58</sup> *Remarks on a Book* etc. 1696. In his criticism Dennis derives directly from Bossu.

<sup>59</sup> E. g., "There are indeed many other Actions besides the Principal one, but they all depend on, and have relation to that which is Principal, with the Unity of which the Unity of the Poems stands or falls."

—Blackmore, in his *Preface*.

<sup>60</sup> Preface to *Iphigenia*, 1700.

<sup>61</sup> Under the influence of Dryden.

<sup>62</sup> Preface to *Iphigenia*, 1700.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Dryden's statement of this, *supra*, and his lines to Congreve on the *Double Dealer*. Dennis, however, clung to the rules, for in the same Preface he says, with evident pride, "That the present Tragedy is more regular than most of our Tragedies are, I have some grounds to believe."

It would carry us too far afield to enter at any length into the Collier controversy, which began about this time, with the appearance of the famous *Short View* (1698). Of this work, and its author's subsequent writings, Farquhar said with justice, "This gentleman had done the drama considerable service, had he arraigned the stage only to punish its misdemeanours, and not take away its life."<sup>64</sup>

As would be foreseen, Collier is in complete accord with the rules,—a fact that appears from the views expressed in his examination of *The Relapse*.<sup>65</sup> His opinions are borrowed from Corneille,<sup>66</sup> whose conclusions he is good enough to accept, but rash enough to narrow. In keeping with the French critic and his English followers, Collier points out the essential interdependence of the three unities. He is spiritlessly orthodox in his exaltation of verisimilitude,—but as there is nothing individual in his pleadings, we may dismiss the *Short View* in favor of one of the rejoinders it called forth.

In the shower of replies<sup>67</sup> to Collier that appeared almost immediately, there is one anonymous pamphlet,<sup>68</sup> which merits particular attention. The unknown writer anticipates fully the opinions that Farquhar maintained in his *Discourse upon Comedy*. The work is a noble vindication of the practice of the English stage,—a complete and sweeping denial of the need and efficacy of French rule and precept. As a defense and assertion of native genius, it stands unparalleled in its day, and is assuredly the handiwork of a man of taste and spirit and backbone. The writer does not seek to prop up his plea with subtle logic; he begs no question; he is content to rest his case

<sup>64</sup>Preface to *The Twin Rivals* (1702)—*Dramatic Works*, ed. A. C. Ewald, 1892, vol. ii, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup>Included in *A short View etc.*; 1698. *Vd.* p. 228 ff.

<sup>66</sup>Collier says, "He that would see more upon this subject must consult Corneille."—*idem*.

<sup>67</sup> See the list in Beljame's book.

<sup>68</sup> *A Defence of Dramatick Poetry: being a Review of Mr. Collier's 'View etc.'*—1698. *Vd.* Part II, p. 28 ff.

upon the practice of Shakespeare, and the dramatic "sense" of the English people. He is a clear-minded, level-headed critic, able to view the question from what was then a novel stand-point. Nor is he lacking in critical acumen, as several instances of fine insight attest.

First comes his Declaration of Independence—hitting the tone of boldness and vividness that marks the entire work:—"For the strict Observation of these Corneillean Rules, are as Dissonant to the English Constitution of the Stage, as the French Slavery to our English Liberty." His thesis thus stated, he goes on to support it,—"Here the shortest way to tell you what will please an English audience, I think, is to look back and see what has pleased them. And here let us first take a view of our best English Tragedies, as our 'Hamlet', 'Mackbeth', 'Julius Caesar', 'Oedipus', 'Alexander', 'Timon of Athens', 'Moor of Venice', and all the rest of our most shining pieces. All these and the rest of their Honourable Brethren, are so far from pent-up in Corneille's narrower Unity Rules.....that nothing is so ridiculous as to pretend to it. The subjects of our English tragedies are generally the whole Revolutions of Governments, States or Families, or those great Transactions, that our Genius of Stage-poetry can no more reach the Heights that can please our Audience, under his Unity Shackles, than an Eagle can soar in a Hen-coop."<sup>32</sup>

This improves on the proud tone of modern English imperialism;—it is the very intensity of triumphant glorification of the home-bred. Yet it is sound in principle, despite the rather promiscuous assemblage of plays cited. The author then goes on to an exposition of the minor unities as the foremost English playwrights have understood them. His ideas are startlingly modern,—and the expression often no less so. "'Tis true", says the unknown, "I allow thus far, That it ought to be the chief care of the Poet, to confine himself into as narrow a compass as he can, without any particular stint, in the two

<sup>32</sup>P. 32. Cf. p. 33, "Corneille may reign Master of his own Revels; but he is neither a Rule-maker nor a Play-maker for our Stage."

First Unities of Time and Place; for which end he must observe two Things: First upon occasion (suppose in such a Subject as *Mackbeth*) he ought to falsifie even History itself. For the Foundation of that Play in the Chronicles, was the Action of 25 Years. But in the Play we may suppose it begun and finish'd in one third of so many Months..... Secondly, the length of Time, and distance of Place ought to be never pointed at nor hinted in the Play..... By this means the Audience, who came both willing and prepar'd to be deceived, and indulge their own Delusion, can pass over a considerable distance both of Time and Place unheeded and unminded, if they are not purposely thrown too openly in their way, to stumble at. Thus *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, and those Historick Plays shall pass glibly; when the Audience shall be almost quite shockt at such a Play as *Henry the 8th*, or the *Duchess of Malfey*. And why, because here's a Marriage and the Birth of a Child, possibly in two Acts; which points so directly to Ten Months length of time, that the Play has very little Air of Reality, and appears too unnatural.”<sup>10</sup> This is indeed refreshing after the disheartening dullness of so much of the criticism we have reviewed.

More daring still is the critic's attack on the major unity.<sup>11</sup> “Here,” he declares, “must be Under-plots, and considerable ones too, possibly big enough to justle the Upperplot, to support a good English Play; nay, though the Under-plots do not much fight under ‘the great General’, and consequently the ‘Play splits and the Poem is double’, as Mr. Collier calls it; yet this instead of weakening the Contrivance or Diluting our Pleasure shall rather strengthen the one, and double the other.”<sup>12</sup>

There remains for us the views of but one dramatist and critic, who comes on the threshold of the new century:—George

<sup>10</sup> P. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. p. 35 ff. The author attacks Corneille and Collier on their notion of the unity of action, calling them “down-right dull and as seriously impertinent (as to our Stage Regulations) as their worst Enemies cou'd wish 'em.”

<sup>12</sup> P. 37.

Farquhar. It is perhaps fitting that this study end with the opinions of a critic who is truly English in his rejection of the strict rules and of rule-makers. Nowhere does this characteristic bent find better expression than in Farquhar's Prologue to *Sir Harry Wildair* (1701) :

"Our youthful author swears he cares not a pin  
For Vassius, Scaliger, Hedelin, or Rapin;<sup>73</sup>  
He leaves to learned pens such labour'd lays,  
You are the rules by which he writes his plays,<sup>74</sup>  
From musty books let others take their view,  
He hates dull reading, but he studies you.

Among his friends here in the pit he reads  
Some rules that every modish writer needs.  
He learns from every Covent Garden critic's face,  
The modern forms of action, time and place."<sup>75</sup>

For a prose, though by no means a prosaic, statement of the same idea, we have Farquhar's *Discourse upon Comedy*<sup>76</sup> (1702). In spirit, and often in letter, this work is of a piece with the views of the nameless critic whose polemic against Collier we have rated so highly. There is the same superb confi-

<sup>73</sup> Sam'l Butler, *Upon Critics Who Judge of Modern Plays Precisely by the rules of the Antients* (1678) forestalls Farquhar in this independence. He says,

"Reduce all Tradegy by Rules of Art  
Back to its Antique Theatre, a Cart," etc....  
Cited in Spingarn, *Crit. Essays*, etc.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Garrick's prologue to Whitehead's play, *supra*.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. The Epilogue to Congreve's *Double Dealer*, cited above; and see *Dramatic Wks. of Farquhar*, 1892 (ed. A. C. Ewald, vol. I, p. 339.) The same note is struck by Sewell in his *Prologue to Betterton's The Sequel of Henry IV*:-

"If sometimes devious from old rules he strays,  
And treads a-wry from Aristotle's ways,  
'Tis but to show.....he dar'd to give offense.  
And laugh'd at slavish Ties.....in any Sence.

<sup>76</sup> In a *Letter to a Friend*, Works, 1711, p. 62 seq.

dence in the native genius; the same willingness to find authority in "the Pit, Box and Galleries"; and the same angry impatience with the flatulent theorizing of "the learned". Farquhar is out of humor with "Our new author.....who first chooses a single Plot, because most agreeable to the Regularity of Criticism, no matter whether it affords Business enough for Diversion or Surprize. He wou'd not for the World introduce a Song or Dance, because his Play must be one entire Action. We must expect no Variety of Incidents, because the Exactness of his three Hours won't give him time for their Preparation. The Unity of Place admits no Variety of Painting or Prospect, by which mischance perhaps we shall lose the only good Scenes in the Play."<sup>77</sup>

Then comes the insistence upon the lesson to be gained from precedent: "The Rules of English Comedy," says Farquhar, "don't lie in the Compass of Aristotle, or his followers, but in Pit, Box and Galleries.....We must consult Shakespeare, Jonson, Fletcher, and others.....We shall find these Gentlemen have fairly dispenc'd with the greatest part of Critical Formalities; the decorums of Time and Place, so much cry'd up of late, had no force of Decorum with them; the Aeconomy of their Plays was *ad libitum*, and the extent of their Plots only limited by the Convenience of Action."<sup>78</sup>

Farquhar then takes a fall out of verisimilitude. "We can expect", he writes, "no more Decorum or Regularity in any Business, than the Nature of the thing will bear; now if the Stage cannot subsist without the Strength of Supposition, and Force of Fancy in the Audience, why should a Poet fetter the Business of his Plot, and starve his Action for the Nicety of an Hour, or the Change of a Scene since the Thought of Man

"p. 62.

<sup>77</sup> p. 73. Farquhar goes on to say, "I would willingly understand the Regularities of *Hamlet*, *Harry the Fourth* and of Fletcher's plays; and yet these have long been the Darlings of the English Audience, and are like to continue with the same Applause, in Defiance of all the Criticisms that ever were publish'd in *Greek* or *Latin*." He is against rambling plays, however: *Vd.* p. 78.

can fly over Hours and Years with the same Ease and in the same Instant of Time, that your Eye glances from the figure of six to seven on the Dial-plate; and can glide from the *Cape of Good Hope* to the Bay of *St. Nicholas*, which is quite across the World, with the same Quickness and Activity, as between *Covent Garden Church* and *Will's Coffee-House.*"<sup>18</sup>

This completes the citations from the critics and dramatists of the 17th century, to the end of which period we have followed the evolution of the theory of dramatic unity. We have witnessed the rather fruitless efforts of Jonson to acclimatise an exotic plant, and the more (though never uniformly) successful attempts of later critics under the compelling guidance of the French. Nor was the wordy fight given up with the end of the century,—for the question is still a moot one in the next.

In retrospect, too, it is possible to see the rise of the spirit that led eventually to the overshadowing, for a time at least, of the unities. The origin of this spirit we have found in Mediæval England, and both Farquhar and the anonymous opponent of Collier, are but 17th century exemplars of the early tradition militating against undue restraint. It is to be noted that at the end of the 17th century, with the growth and final voicing of the English freedom, comes a new impetus to the appreciation of Shakespeare and his Elizabethan co-workers. As an accompaniment of this is, of necessity, the rejuvenance of the imagination. Yet the unities, once freely admitted, were not to be cavalierly dismissed. As a matter of fact, they have never since died out in England, as they never have been superseded in France,—nor is it in the nature of the drama for them to become a dead issue in either country. As Professor Posnett says, "The truth is that under an aspect conventional, pedantic, and therefore repulsive alike to creative and critical freedom, the unities conceal an attempt to solve certain problems involving the highest efforts of philosophic inquiry. The need of dramatic limitation in space, time and action, is no mere whim of critical fancy. It rests on truths which the evolution of

<sup>18</sup>p. 79. Cf. the note in Pye's *A Commentary etc.*, cited above.

man, socially and individually, establishes, and which his animal and physical environments amply confirm.”<sup>80</sup>

This leads directly to the question—are the unities extinct in the English drama of today? Prof. Lounsbury would have us believe that they are.<sup>81</sup> He says, “it is equally evident that it is Shakespeare’s practice which is the one followed upon the modern stage. Stress is no longer laid upon the unity of time and place. In regard to these the doctrine is now so thoroughly discredited in theory and discarded in practice, that there are playwrights of our day who, so far from accepting it, do not even know of its ever having had an existence. Accordingly it might seem an unnecessary slaying of the slain to consider it here at any length”<sup>82</sup>. . . . But, looking far into the future, Professor Lounsbury is able to speak of “some period in the revolution of the ever-changing”<sup>83</sup> canons of taste and

<sup>80</sup> *Comp. Lit.* 1886, p. 35.

<sup>81</sup> And compare what Professor Thorndike says in his *Tragedy* 1908 (which I read after this article was in the hands of the editor): “Even the unities, whether as observed in the Greek Theatre or as defined by French and Italian critics, may, after generations of debate, be safely relegated as nonessential.” (p. 7). But cf. p. 10 ff: “Though the action of modern tragedies has usually been less simple than that of the Greeks—the tendency today seems to be toward a return to the simplicity that Aristotle had in mind.”

Professor Thorndike, who seems ever ready to put accepted views to the test, discusses Ibsen’s unity of action (p. 11 *idem*) and on p. 313 points out that “in practice the unities are likely to result in a counterbalancing defect, in a concentration of incident improbable and artificial.”

<sup>82</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 13. Prof. Lounsbury cites Browning’s plays as preserving the unities, and adds, “But plays like these—never acted or unsuccessful if acted—are not representative of the dominant influences which now affect the English stage.” (p. 15). Against this it may be urged that Browning’s plays are not unactable because they preserve the unities,—any more than Tennyson’s which disregard them in general.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Brunetière: *La Loi du Théâtre* (Preface to *Les Annales du Théâtre*, par E. Noel et E. Stoullig, p. V) “Mais, la vrai vérité c’est qu’il n’y a pas de règles, en ce sens; il n’y en aura jamais. Il n’y a que des conventions, qui sont nécessairement changeantes, puisqu’elles

criticism", when "the doctrine of the unities may, for awhile at least, come again into fashion. It is improbable, to be sure; it is by no means impossible."<sup>44</sup>

With Prof. Lounsbury's opinion I am unable to agree. In this study it has been several times implied that in their strictest acceptance—that of "critics of a dissecting turn of mind"<sup>45</sup>—the unities are indefensible. But, viewed broadly, the rules, having their basis in a by no means contemptible desire for limitation, are closely connected with the *unity* of all art works. It is true that this unity is a higher and nobler thing<sup>46</sup> than Boileau or Rapin or Bossu ever dreamt of, or than Corneille, perhaps, ever conceived. Whether one calls it, with Lessing, *moral* unity, or with some others unity of *imagination*,<sup>47</sup> or yet again, unity of *interest*, or *impression*, or *appeal*,<sup>48</sup>—it is, in the final analysis, the unity of Michael Angelo,—"the purgation of all superfluities." And the unity of action, and even those of time and place—if one could forget the discredit into which Italian and French theorizing has brought all three—belong of right to the drama, and have work marked out for them.

n'ont pour objet que de réaliser le caractère essentiel de l'œuvre dramatique et que les moyens d'y réussir varient selon les lieux, les moments, et les hommes."

<sup>44</sup> Cf. p. 23, "There are indeed certain subjects, or certain ways of treating a subject, which may be said to exact" (the observation of the unities.) Prof. Lounsbury instances *Gammer Gurton's Needle* for place, and Randolph's *Muses' Looking-Glass* for time.

<sup>45</sup> Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dram. Kunst*, xvii.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Schlegel, *idem*, "Far, therefore from rejecting the law of a perfect unity in tragedy as unnecessary, I require a deeper, more intrinsic, and more mysterious unity than that with which most critics are satisfied. This unity I find in the tragic compositions of Shakespeare, in quite as great perfection as in those of Aeschylus and Sophocles."

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Courthope, *Life in Poetry, Law in Taste*, pp. 48 & 65.

<sup>48</sup> For the knowledge of, and references to, these three terms, as for many other valuable suggestions, I am indebted to the kind interest that Professor A. L. Bouton of New York University has taken in this paper.

At this day the unities are coming to their rightful heritage. In more than one important phase of contemporary drama they are demanded,—and what is most significant—demanded by the exigencies of the stage. Just so did they arise to exercise their rightful functions in the Greek theatre.

In particular, two features of the modern drama tend to conserve the unities: the employment of Scenery, and the paramount interest in Character. Scenery is to the modern stage what the Chorus was to the Greek—an ever-present, limiting force. It permits of few changes, and if there ever was a powerful factor in preserving the veridical, this is it. Scenery is verisimilitude objectified and made visible. Hence arises its greatest draw-back—it clips the wings of imagination.

But scenery is an outer, a palpable feature of the stage. The other is an inner, subtler, and more potent effect,—the prying into the moods of men, the laying bare of the springs of action. If a connection were established between scenery and character, it would, from a certain viewpoint, scarcely be a fancied one. The spectator, his imagination once atrophied and rendered useless by elaborate scenery, turns perforce, to follow curiously and questioningly, the actors. From the actions of men he turns to the motives of these actions,—from Plot, he turns to Character. Nor is the change wholly lacking in compensation, for the spectator's mind is now centered upon human beings, coping with forces and problems that to him are usually comprehensible, and always familiar.

This is, of course, not the whole of our drama of to-day—but it is assuredly one significant phase of it. Perhaps, too, it will be increasingly our drama of to-morrow. At any rate, the dramatic unities—whether or not playwrights know the philosophy and the sophistry of them—show unmistakably the signs of renewed vigor. One can but hope that vacuous theorizing will not be their portion again.

LOUIS SIGMUND FRIEDLAND.

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